

Dud Cigarettes

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Dud Cigarettes

by [hydralilies](#)

Summary

And if Dream's not humming, he's 'click, click, click'ing that godforsaken tongue piercing against the backs of his teeth; almost as if to *taunt* George. To remind him of its existence.

There are so many *little* things that make up Dream. It's the way he fiddles with the rings on his fingers, spinning and dislodging them over and over. It's the way he hardly says anything; leaving the room for a majority of the day and only returning at midnight with a smile and mulberry marks on his neck.

For Dream, this arrangement is probably paradise.

For George, it's sweet, sweet torture.

Or, Dream and George are college dormmates. That's all they're *supposed* to be. But for George, Dream becomes a hidden obsession of his; one that's jarring and unexpected. Luckily for George, Dream may be able to help more than first thought.

Notes

Hello! And welcome to my new multi chapter project!

I'm very excited to start this! Basics first:

This is a university AU, where dnf are roommates and Dream is confident in himself and is kind of a (hot) deviant. George is infatuated by him, but he's not sure why :)

Also this is a bit different than how I normally write- I wanted to experiment with a more... vague (?) style, or one that describes events more generally rather than delving into every little action and detail. I'm still getting used to it, so I apologize if it's a bit confusing. I had some friends beta and tell me what I needed to clarify, so hopefully it's a smooth read !!

I've mapped the fic out, and I think it'll have about seven chapters (tentatively). Brief warning: it'll be a bit of a slow burn, and there'll be angst, which I don't usually do. BUT I'm super excited to share my ideas with you all! Also, warning for internalized homophobia, because that's a major part of this fic. Tags will be added as I go on.

[Twitter](#)

If Dream and/or George ever say they're uncomfortable with shipping/nsfw, this fic will be immediately taken down.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Silver and Smoke

George doesn't remember seeing him for the first time.

There's no definitive day, place, nor time, that stands out against the grainy blur of everyday dorm buildings, crumbling concrete, and desolate lecture halls.

But George knows his presence.

He's the aftermath of a storm; wet pavement and windswept brush. He's the lingering resonance of secondhand smoke; present enough to be known, yet not concentrated enough to blacken lungs.

He's *something*. That's for sure.

He doesn't have a face; it's planes and ridges undefined amongst the swirl of stranger's visages in George's mind.

Indistinguishable.

But. *But*. George knows he has rustic blond hair; the color of sunlight-soaked oakwood. And he has large hands. Silver-studded rings of metal adorning the smooth skin between corded knuckles. There might be freckles there, too.

And *yes*, George thinks it's weird he memorized the little details before his face, let alone before *meeting* the guy. But he can't choose what his brain files away, nor can he choose what it dismisses. So he's stuck with flashes of glinting metal and defined ropes of golden tendons instead.

They filter behind his lids at random times. And each time, without fail, he attempts to conjure the face of the elusive man who haunts the foggy corner of his mind. Yet, he always seems out of reach. George doesn't know *where* he got these images, *who* they belong to, or *why* they linger like an irreversible stain on cotton fabric.

It's infuriating.

That is, until it's not.

Because suddenly he's *everywhere*. He's smoke filling his airway, he's the smell of rainfall tickling the back of his throat, he's the glimmer of polished silver in his eye.

He's standing *right in front of him*.

In *his* dorm room.

To say George is bewildered would be an ocean-deep understatement. He's floundering a bit, lips parting without sound passing between them. The suitcase in his hand slips and slides against accumulating perspiration on his palms.

The man isn't even *looking* at him.

He's glued to his phone, idly lingering next to the bed shoved to the left-most wall. His belongings are strewn across the barren top of his mattress; several split and frayed IKEA brand bags accompanied by a few weighted bins. There's a matte guitar case leaned away from his mess, delicately rested against a barren expanse of tack-holed plaster at the foot of the bed.

Its surface is blanketed with stickers. Some old and worn, some new and sleek, some of brands George recognizes, others of logos he's never seen before.

His gaze snaps up to the oakwood strands on the crown of the man's head. George never noticed, but it's darker at the roots. Lighter at the ends. Slightly shaggy, falling in waves over his brow and sweeping loose curls along the curve of his nape.

And it's not until George uncements his feet from beneath the doorway that clarity at *last* finds peace in the blurry corner of his mind. Because the boy raises his head at the sound of footsteps.

George immediately notes the color of his eyes- *yellow? Green?* His colorblindness rears its head at the most inopportune times.

There's a disarming smile to his lips; smug and comfortable in the way it's presented. He's got a strong jawline, sturdy and coiled tight, smattered with light stubble. But George has to steady his breathing when his gaze falls upon the nose, eyebrow, *and* lip studs. The metal falls in sync with the rings on his digits; glinting with reflected sunlight cast from the dingy window on the far wall. And *well*, George applauds himself a bit when he skirts across the splash of hazel freckles on his cheeks and nose. The apples of his cheeks have subtle color to them, which George can only discern as a ruddy blush.

Fashion isn't something he typically associates with men, but even *he* can admit the man is stylish.

A dark, black jumper drapes over his shoulders, cuffs falling just past the jut of his knuckles. There's a white collar peeking above the hem, curled delicately just below the swell of his Adam's apple (a button-up, most likely). Equally baggy jeans equipped with rips and fraying threads drown his legs until they reach concealed ankles, hidden by white socks.

George forces his gaze to re-settle on the bemused face that's now peering at him with a look of intrigue.

"Hey." He speaks.

George thinks he sounds like the rustle of leaves in the prelude to cloudburst, or the taste of honeyed jasmine tea, or the caress of a gentle touch. If it were a hand, it'd be calloused and friction-lined around the edges, yet graceful in its movements; smooth and caring.

He doesn't know why he's assaulted by this vivid imagery. So, he ignores it, and clears his throat.

"Hi," George responds. He takes a few steps towards the right side of the room- his. The strap of his backpack falls from his shoulder and lands heavily onto the bed, frame creaking at its joints in protest.

"You're a freshman."

Why the statement *isn't* posed as a question is beyond George. And it's then that he registers the snide lilt to the man's lips; the cocky, boisterous way he's framed against decades-worn walls.

It irritates George to a subtle degree.

“I’m a *junior*,” he responds, sharper than he intended. This guy’s full of himself; George can tell. It’s such a stark contrast to his enchanting front; his eye-catching exterior. How someone can be so easy on the eyes but so harsh on the brain is beyond him. George gnaws the inside of his cheek, perplexed, and turns to sit on the mattress. A puff of dust is kicked up in his added weight.

The man hums back. “I’m a sophomore.”

I don’t care, George wants to say.

“Cool,” he mumbles instead.

There’s some awkward silence, but neither particularly care enough to reign back it’s uncomfortableness right away.

“Weird that you’re living on campus in these shitty dorms. Thought you upperclassmen would wanna rent an apartment,” the boy eventually remarks. “You know, like, with your friends and stuff.” It’s provoking; *smug*.

Purposeful.

Or maybe George is reading too much into it. He’s been doing that a lot lately.

“I was supposed to move into the apartment across the river with my ex, but *clearly* that didn’t work out,” George answers him, although he doesn’t know why he even bothers. “So I had to find a place to live last minute. Dorms were the only place left that would take me.”

The man hums again. It’s beginning to sound like disinterest, the more he does it. Doesn’t help that his gaze is still transfixed on his phone.

Dick.

“Did he, like, break your heart or something? Or the other way around?”

Oh, so *now* he's asking questions.

"That's none of your business," George starts. "And no, *she* didn't dump me. Just, some stuff happened. *Personal* stuff."

Another hum.

Anger boils dangerously beneath the surface of George's skin.

"Sorry about that." The man stretches, and *clicks* his phone off. "Guess you're stuck here with me."

"Yeah," George mutters, "guess I am." He tucks his knees up beneath his chin, looping both arms around his shins. The man eyes this motion curiously.

"Well, I'm gonna go get a bagel from the shop down the street. You want anything?"

George cocks an eyebrow. He doesn't understand this guy.

"Uhm," he sputters, "no, I'm good, I think."

His roommate chuckles, and *oh wow*, okay. It's low and gritty sounding, rough as turf yet downy as feathers or smooth as melted chocolate. *Great*, more things to associate with him.

"You *think*?" he questions back at him, slipping on white, lace-up shoes. He grabs a lanyard from the hook next to the doorway, slinging it around his neck with practiced ease. "Just tell me your favorite kind of bagel, princess."

George thinks he should feel diffident and indignant from the nickname, but it hardly registers. "Asiago."

The blond shoots him a boyish, toothy smile.

“That wasn’t so hard.” He turns heel, grasping the knob and jiggling it a few times to shave rust off the inner mechanism. His rings *clink* against the metal; silver on gold reflecting shards of light. George is blinded temporarily by looking just a *little* too intensely. “I’ll be back.”

And like that, he’s gone. The door slams shut, and George is left in solitude.

Until he isn’t.

Because the door swings back open abruptly, and a freckled face is peering through it. “My name’s Dream, by the way.”

Oh right. He doesn’t even know this guy’s name.

But *Dream*? George scrunches his nose up. “That’s not your real name.”

And this *Dream* just laughs, gently. George tastes jasmine-flavored chocolate at the back of his throat.

“No, but it’s *a* name.”

He lingers by the doorframe, waiting for something.

Oh.

“George,” the brunet grits out, eventually.

Another smile splits across stretched, pink lips. George notes that Dream has quite pronounced canines.

“Alright. Be back soon, *Georgie*.” Then he’s gone again. And George is left with a jaw half-agape, in the shape of a prepared curse for the improper nickname.

But, there’s nothing left to do. He sighs to himself, and begrudgingly gets to his feet.

Setting up his side of the room is practiced; precise and methodical. In his third year, he’s been moving in and out of cramped spaces for a *long* time, and it seems like muscle memory to him, now. Throwing sheets over the twin-sized mattress, setting picture frames of his family and friends on the nightstand (there’s a frame he leaves in the box; it doesn’t belong in his room anymore), tossing clothes onto hangers inside the meager excuse of a wardrobe. He’s pinning a worn poster of *The Hoosiers* above the head of his bed when the door creaks open again.

George glances over his shoulder to find Dream loitering about the entrance, an *Einstein’s* bag gripped in one hand while he examines the decorated side of the room.

There’s a strange, metallic clicking noise. George notes that all his jewelry is idle.

But then Dream is opening his mouth. “Here’s your bagel, Georgie.”

With a roll to his eyes, George shuffles out of his kneeling position on the bed, sliding pale legs off the mattress to sit on the side.

And maybe George shouldn’t have been paying *this* much attention to his lips, because *oh*. A flash of metal glitters behind an ivory set of teeth, and another *click* rings out. It feels deafening in George’s ears, although he knows it’s probably unnoticeable.

“You have a tongue piercing,” George finds himself saying without permission. His face heats up in meek embarrassment.

Luckily, Dream just laughs, slipping off his shoes and padding to where George sits. Now that he’s *this* close, he realizes just how *tall* Dream is.

Definitely tall enough to tower over George.

The faint essence of smoke overwhelms his senses until there's a stutter to his breathing.

"Yeah, I do." Dream doesn't elaborate. Instead, he places George's bagel in his lap and turns to slump in his desk chair.

They don't speak for the rest of the night.

George isn't sure what he expected, when Dream dissolves from wisps of smoke into a fully-realized roommate. They were still practically strangers, even two weeks into their arrangement. Which George doesn't necessarily find *odd*, per-se. He just feels... strangely antsy about the whole ordeal.

He's not sure why.

George tries to rationalize the feeling a multitude of times; while he's sitting on a bench during lunch, or when he's lounging in bed, watching Dream from the corner of his peripheral. Or even while he's crammed in the back of his organic chemistry lecture hall, and his hand eludes him in taking proper notes; too engaged in his daydreams to get tendons and muscles to twitch.

Dream is his roommate. They should see each other once in the morning, once at night. It's a practiced routine; the way George has survived for all three years of his university experience.

And yet, Dream never leaves him.

Shimmering metal paints the backs of his lids while the trees he passes morph into honey-drenched strands. The cigarette butts on the pavement linger long after they've been crushed into concrete, and there's an incessant *click, click, click* to the way some kid taps his pen against his desk. The sound haunts him for the rest of the day.

There are also whispers. George can't discern whether he's imagined them or not, at times.

“ - *I saw Dream leaving Chi Omega the other day. - ”*

“ - *I danced with him last night, you know? He’s a great kisser. - ”*

“ - *Is he dating her? I thought he was dating - ”*

Yeah, George is definitely imagining things.

He convinces himself the girls next to him in physics are talking about the man two rows down from him. He convinces himself the passerby on his way to his room had implied some *other* blond-haired deviant had bedded her last week. And he tells himself the woman at his door with the borrowed, Dream-sized sweatshirt in her hands and apologies on her lips is just returning a friendly offer to fend off the cold one night.

The rumors are drowned out by his own thoughts, anyway.

But, it isn’t all bad, of course- living with Dream.

There’s no discomfort in sharing such a cramped space between the two of them. Dream sticks to himself, silently slaving away over his english assignments with earbuds lodged in his ears. He’s a surprisingly diligent worker, which George only learns from mute observation. He *also* learns that Dream hums.

A lot.

And if he’s not humming, he’s ‘*click, click, click*’ ing that godforsaken tongue piercing against the backs of his teeth; almost as if to *taunt* George. To remind him of its existence. There are so many *little* things that make up Dream. It’s the way he fiddles with the rings on his fingers, spinning and dislodging them over and over. It’s the way he *melts* into his music; melding with the mattress as soon as earbuds hit their destination. It’s the way he hardly says anything; leaving the room for a majority of the day and only returning at midnight with a smile and a greeting.

For Dream, this arrangement is probably paradise.

For George, it's sweet, sweet torture.

He's memorized and filed away every small detail of the man across from him, analyzing the way he chews his lips 'til they're peeled and red, and the way he pulls half of his hair into a ponytail at the crown of his head, the way he carries himself; *confident* and *cocky* and *smug*.

Not to mention the way Dream's guitar case has sat, untouched, collecting dust at the foot of his bed. George can't help but allow curiosity to take control of his sight; eyeing the damned thing at least once a day.

But, as all things do, George's infatuation mellows out.

They're three weeks into the semester, and their first exams are steadily approaching. Dream has been staying in a lot more recently; spending most nights bent awkwardly over his desk, looming above a MacBook that irks him because of how small and narrow the keys are. George's brain *loves* to remind him just how *large* Dream's hands seem to be, especially when they're clumsily dancing across a keyboard, or raking through his hair, or *gripping* his comforter when he prepares to leap onto it.

The blond is tall enough to loft his bed and completely disregard the stool beneath him.

George has a three-tier step ladder.

Dream had looked as if he was going to laugh at him the first day, but instead he just smirked, and kept his thoughts to himself, like always. It almost frustrated George, to some degree.

Why?

He isn't sure.

And now, George is watching Dream. *Again*.

Ivory pages on his lap are filled to the brim with graphite smears. Every word and letter he's written blurs together when his focus drifts away from the recorded lecture on his laptop screen.

Dream looks particularly different today.

Instead of his normal suave attire, he's dressed down in an oversized pullover and sweats that hug the curve of his thighs a little *too* well. His digits are barren of the normally-acquainted decor of shiny jewelry. George thinks his finger pads are probably calloused and rash as they flit across his keyboard.

He'll never know if they are or not, realistically.

So George's brain fills the gaps, imagining rough skin drifting over his own; large hands skirting along the expanse of his knuckles, his palms, his *wrists*.

An unsteady breath leaves George's lungs in a rush as he observes the subtle furrow of dark-blond brows.

His piercings are gone.

They sit abandoned on his nightstand, indistinguishable amongst the mess of sterling silver studs.

George stares at his lips, as if he can peer through flesh. He imagines a tongue devoid of metallic enhancement, and wonders if it lay amongst the pile on the table, or if it's still-

Click, click, click.

Ah. That answers that question.

Dream's face seems much rounder, much *softer*, without the adornation of man-made material. While George's gaze is normally inclined to hone-in on the shimmer of studs, *now*, all he wants to do is appreciate how long his lashes are, how abundant his hazel freckles seem, and how gentle the curve of his upturned-nose is.

There's a scar just below his left brow.

George looks away.

All of it makes him wonder why he even *wears* the damned things.

He can be shallow and narrow it down to Dream's desire for sex-appeal, which seems to do wonders for him if the whispers on campus paint a vivid enough story. Or, maybe, he can think Dream wears them for himself.

George decides it's the former. He doesn't want to think about it too much.

Dream starts coming home late again.

Or, not at all.

It isn't uncommon for him to slink back to the dorm at unholy times, ranging from one a.m. to six a.m. He's cognizant enough to keep the lights off, to pad lightly across the carpet, and to slip beneath his covers without so much as a rustle.

But George is a light sleeper.

Sometimes, there are two voices outside the door, before Dream opens it. Muffled giggles and light talk. If George strains hard enough, he can make out what they're saying.

He doesn't.

And other times, Dream's alone.

George knows when he's had a poor outing, based on the heaviness of his steps, or his disregard for properly hanging up his jacket. The *thump* of fabric across his desk chair is indication enough.

And just the same, he knows when Dream's in the clouds; when his footsteps are light and downy as feathers, when there's a smile to the way he guides himself to the foreign warmth of his own comforter.

George hates that he's curious.

Hates that he wants to pry. Hates that he wonders which lips and tongues bring out the tenderness in the soles of his feet. Hates that he desires to know the faces of those who have chained anchors to his ankles and created a tempest; merciless in the way he shucks his jacket off his shoulders much earlier into the night than normal.

On the bad days, George tries for conversation.

He'll sit up in bed and feign innocence, as if he *hadn't* already noted the heaviness of his heels or the sour smell of a dud cigarette. Rub his eye as if to drain grogginess that hadn't existed in the first place.

"*What's wrong?*" He'll ask.

Dream will huff, silhouette bathed in cool luminescence of the half-moon.

"*Nothing. It was my fault.*"

George will watch Dream shoot him a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, and watch as he asks him if he wants a bagel in the morning.

And then they'll fall asleep.

Now, it's a chilly Thursday morning, and Dream had one of his '*good outings*' the night prior. He invites George to accompany him to the *Einstein's* across the street, instead of going alone, like normal. It doesn't feel weird to be sidled against Dream in the elevator, nor does it feel awkward when they make idle chatter crossing cracked pavement, worn by millions of students' feet in its lifetime.

It doesn't even feel weird when Dream orders for him. George wonders why they don't do this more often.

That is, until he *notices*.

Notices the darkened color of plum and bursted capillaries just below the jut of his Adam's apple; peering at George with vice. *Taunting* him.

There's a strange sort of dull knock against his chest at the sight, but he swallows it down alongside the asiago bagel wrapped in frozen pale fingers.

On their way back, George goes silent. He can't stop *staring* at it. And it's *infuriating* him.

And Dream, well, Dream *notices*.

Maybe he pays more attention than George thought, when he stops just outside their door. He turns to face him, a curious glint smothered in vicious emerald irises.

"What are you staring at?" Dream asks. It's not judgemental, and George even thinks it sounds a bit cocky; *knowing*.

George tries to ignore how quickly his cheeks fill with blood, glancing to the side and letting his eyes fall somewhere along the split foundation in the wall. He wishes he hadn't finished his bagel so fast; his fingers and mouth feel restless. So he gnaws the dried skin of his lips.

Dream's gaze wavers when George answers.

"Those look like they hurt." He dodges Dream's accusation with slight, faked ignorance.

George doesn't have to *look* to know there's mirth melding with taunting viridian green.

Doe eyes trace the movement of Dream's arm as he brings a palm to cup the side of his own neck, rings reflecting artificial light from the bulbs overhead. George foolishly thinks they look better with refracted sunlight instead.

"They did," he answers.

George feels his tongue go dry as deft fingerpads drift over mottled violet and indigo bruises-*hickeys*- peeking above the curl of his collar. He swallows, thick as paint. And Dream just cocks his head, smirking around his next words, "And I liked it."

George rationalizes the emotion tying knots in his chest to be irritation; annoyance at this guy's lack of shame, his incessant arrogance and snarky remarks. Yes, that's it. He purposefully ignores the fluttering in his stomach when Dream's thumb presses into a particularly saturated mark.

Questions boil on the tip of his tongue, but he can't seem to get any to launch.

So they head back inside, and George kicks off his shoes before climbing atop his bed to lay flat. Dream is fiddling with something just outside his field of vision. George squeezes his eyes shut to avoid staring again.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" he blurts.

The room goes still.

Light footsteps. The dwindling fragrance of windswept rainfall fills George's lungs. He knows Dream is looming next to him. He refuses to open his eyes, because of this very notion.

But a warm palm decides for him, cradling his jaw and shocking George's eyes ajar. They flutter rapidly in the wake of Dream's fingers brushing against untamed stubble, guiding a startled face to the side. Their eyes meet, and George can't breathe. Can't swallow. Can't *move*, under the scrutiny of piercing green and the realization that Dream wears *eyeliner*.

Subtle, tasteful, and barely-there.

But now George *knows*, and that only means more sublime torture.

“Why do you wanna know, Georgie?” Dream murmurs, coy in the way it’s delivered.

“Just curious.”

There’s some truth to that. But George refuses to acknowledge the veiled lies in the statement.

Dream’s thumb is *so close* to George’s bottom lip. A mere inch. The warm weight on his chin is all he can focus on, and if not that, then it’s the coolness of heavy metal rings grazing his jaw.

George knows he’s leaning into the touch. Maybe Dream knows, too.

“I don’t.”

For some reason, relief settles in George’s bones. Dream pats his cheek a few times, and then he’s gone. Across the room on his own bed. He might as well be an ocean away.

George allows himself to relax. He goes boneless, and opens his phone to scroll through Twitter. But nothing on the screen is registering.

Because Dream’s fingertips are soft. They’re gentle. Tender.

George’s eyes flutter shut.

Fuck.

George tries. He really does.

Tries to busy himself, to occupy his time by going to restaurants with friends, or studying at the library, away from the comfort of a bed and the glint of facial piercings.

And if Dream notices how much time he's been spending away from the dorm, he doesn't mention it.

The distractions feel as if they're working.

Until they're not.

And George is back to daydreaming in lecture halls and shuffling through perplexing images behind ignorant lids. He feels stuck, in a way. Because Dream is quicksand, and George is sinking faster, faster, *faster*.

People-watching becomes his full-time job. Because at least these people aren't *Dream*; they aren't brazen golden boys with metal in their skin and an ego to rival the Gods. They're just... *people*.

George observes his classmates in chemistry, most often. The hall is massive enough to conceal his gaze, sitting in the last row to avoid judgemental eyes. Brown irises sift through his peers, attempting to retain the smaller details of these people, because if he can do that, it means Dream isn't special. It means George isn't *weird* for feeling how he feels.

The girl three rows down from him is beautiful.

Chestnut hair swept into a high ponytail, loose fringe framing the smooth planes of her face. George blinks, and all he can see is oak wood. His breathing slows. She has acrylic nails, long and shapely, delicately smoothing eraser shavings from her notebook. It's quite colorful within the confines of noir binding; headers bolded in turquoise and letters neat and orderly. Before metal jewelry and soft fingertips can cloud his vision, he sweeps his gaze down.

Here, like this, George can admire her figure, and the way her hands seem lithe and delicate, or how her lashes are long and thick with the enhancement of mascara. Even the button of her nose, rounded and sculpted for the loveliest of profiles, is something of beauty.

He can sit here and appreciate how gorgeous she is.

That's not difficult, at all.

But then he tries thinking *more*. About her hands, and how they'd feel in his. He's thinking about her cherry-petaled lips on his own, his palms on her waist, her breasts against his chest.

Anxiety swirls a pit of tar in his stomach when he's abruptly swept into the body he owned a few months ago. The *past*. George has to squeeze his eyes shut when his misfortunes pull him under. Memories flash like lightning behind his lids, seeping into his bones and chaining him to their grasp with lock and key. There's the severe feeling of hesitance, unsure fingers hooked into a pink blouse, an angry, feminine face with frustration on her tongue. Confusion-laced fear nestles an arrow straight through the slats of his ribs, and then there's the memory of muffled yelling; a mixture of his own voice and someone he used to know. *A lover's spat*. Except this one would end in a slap to the face, the clicking of marching heels, the frantic tugging of suitcases from dusty closets, and the slam of a guilt-ridden door.

And then, silence. Emptiness.

George can't look at the girl anymore. Bile claws at his throat, and he shuffles his feet against the dusty floor beneath his seat.

War-torn fingers thread through his hair, and he *pulls*. His heart is hammering against his ribcage; he's sure the girl three rows down can hear it.

And so, he looks to the person next to her.

A young man. Sharp-jawed, jet-black hair with a buzzed undercut. He's dressed in a salmon button-down with blue jeans, a sweatshirt draped across the back of his seat and a watch about his wrist.

Handsome, George decides.

But there's this strange emotion bubbling up his tongue when he observes the subtle arch of his brow, and the slope of his nose. The way his lips are shapely and rosy, the way his hair falls haphazardly into his vision, the way the top few buttons of his shirt are undone, exposing an expanse of olive skin. And how his sleeves are rolled up his forearms; muscles and tendons flexing and rippling under smooth skin with each note he takes.

George is hit with the realization.

This man is *pretty*.

Defining him as *handsome* does little justice.

George has never found a man pretty before.

His breathing gets labored when he gazes at strong, large, corded hands. When he stares at sculpted lips for a bit too long. When he thinks about bulky fingers pressed into the skin of his waist.

And, *oh god*, George needs to leave.

Because the girl is leaning over the arm of her seat, cupping a hand around her mouth to whisper a string of words to the man. Because they're laughing with each other, and his arm is around her shoulders. Because they're leaning in for a *kiss*.

George is out the door within seconds.

Nausea builds in his throat, shakily walking away from the realizations he'd left abandoned in his seat. The sounds of his footsteps echo off the abandoned hallway of the building complex.

Click, click, click.

The sound lingers for much longer than it should.

A shudder rips up his spine with vice, because if he isn't thinking of *her*, then he's thinking of *him*.
Of hair swept into a half ponytail. Of metal in tongues.

God.

With mercy strung on a string in front of his face, just out of reach, George blindly stumbles back to the familiar embrace of his walking nightmare.

When he gets back, Dream is gone.

Which isn't surprising. And, honestly, it's a little relieving.

It's only seven at night, but George has been suffocating in a sea of complicated emotions and concentrated smoke for the entire day, and it's made him feel utterly *exhausted*.

He shucks off his jeans and pulls his shirt over his head. They lay abandoned on the floor.

George can't be bothered to care, after tonight.

But shutting his eyes and drifting off to unconsciousness seems feeble; nearly *impossible*. There's a consuming weight upon his shoulders, digging under his skin and burrowing into the marrow of his bones.

He thumbs through his photo gallery on his phone. A choked noise escapes the clutches of his chest when he scrolls far enough up to find *her*.

To find the reason he's *here*, stuck in a cramped room with his internal demons and crazed obsession.

She was always a mellow person; soft spoken and giggly, loving but confident. And George sought that confidence in her. Maybe he even admired it, or was *jealous* of it. Because she knew who she was. Knew her direction in life and what she wanted.

And, at the time, George thought he knew, too.

But the phantom feeling of a normally-gentle palm cracking across his cheek makes the pit in his stomach grow tenfold. It makes him remember *why* he's in this predicament in the first place.

Her shrill voice disrupts the fog in his mind.

"You need to figure this out, whatever it is that's going on with you. And I can't help you do that. That's on you."

George sighs, and drops his phone into the nest of his comforter. He rolls over, and falls asleep with the low light of the lamp casting warm shadows upon the walls.

Of course, he doesn't sleep for long. He *can't*, not when a hurricane of slamming doors, boyish smiles with pointed canines, unbuttoned shirts, and polished studs continuously hammer against the hollow of his brain. The images ricochet over and over and *over*, until George jolts awake with a groan.

He's breathing *hard*, and he soothes uneasy lungs with a palm pressed to his heart. His clock reads twelve twenty-two.

With a long exhale, George slumps back into the cavern of his sheets. He turns and faces Dream's abandoned side of the room. It's predictably barren; Dream has no posters, no pictures, no souvenirs. And it just makes George more curious.

Dream is a mystery.

He's a disappearing act, a slight of hand, the depths of the ocean. A sour taste floods George's mouth when he recalls how strong the urge is to explore the uncharted land that is *Dream*. He wants to map the man out; learn the ins and outs of his character, claim the parts of him no other

gets to see, and peer within the confines of tanned skin and devious looks.

It's such a violent, *vicious* feeling. A foreign one, too.

Never before has George experienced this type of obsession; one he has to keep under wraps and futilely ignore until it eats him alive.

George bundles himself tighter beneath the blankets, as if their feigned protection will somehow shield him from Dream's snare. At the same time, his eyes betray him; catching the neck of Dream's guitar case peeking above the foot of his bed.

It's still untouched. George wonders why.

He feels like a jester- a *fool*, while Dream is the icy knight in the corner of his eye; face hidden behind brass chainmail and metallic armor. He comes and goes, disappearing behind brick walls and melding with the dozens of other soldiers. Yet, George still seeks him out. Tries to memorize the little things about him; how his brandished shoulder pads are always freshly polished with oil, how a tuft of golden hair peeks from the gaps in his helmet, how there's a jarring scratch just above the left breastplate. He does it all just so he can attempt to quell his intrigue.

But it never seems to be enough.

There's barely time to process the sound of boots on carpet before there's a *click* of the door unlocking. George freezes, and slips his eyes closed.

Regret churns angrily in his chest when he remembers *why* he desires to seem like he's sleeping. Despite this, his ears analyze anyway; honing in on each sound emanating from the new presence in the room.

The footsteps today are somewhat indistinguishable, at first. George thinks he may have had a bad outing, when rubber soles clunk noisily against the floor as the lock returns to its previous position. But then, there's the gentle rustle of leather, and his coat is neatly hung up on the hook beside the door. Bitterness blankets George's tongue.

He's had a good night.

George can just *tell*. And he *hates* that he can tell.

Boots slip off, and socked feet pad across the rug between their beds. They halt, right in the center of the room, which is *not* normal. George simmers the urge to furrow his brow.

There's a few tense moments of silence. Not even the shuffle of cloth or the monotonous *clink* of jewelry against enamel breaks the surface tension hovering above the room.

Finally, he can tell when Dream moves. Thankfully, away from where George's face displays fake slumber.

The curiosity in his stomach is a horrible, *horrible* thing.

At the first sound of fabric, George allows his lids to crack open. He adjusts to the influx of warm light from his bedside lamp, before letting his gaze fall upon broad shoulders and *miles* of bronze skin, and...

Oh.

George doesn't think his mouth should go this dry, at the sight of his roommate shirtless. But it does, nonetheless, and he doesn't think he can stop himself from eyeing the man without restraint. Feebly, he blames it on exhaustion, for caring so little.

Dream's faced away from him, shirt in hand, phone in the other; eyes trained on the dimmed screen. George almost feels bad for taking advantage of Dream's distraction; *almost*.

The planes of his shoulder blades and nape are sharply defined and *wide*. They just make the curve of his waist look even *smaller*, which George didn't think possible. He might even vaguely compare it to the exaggerated sinch between a woman's rib cage and hip bones, just without the flare of femininity. The sight of narrow hips snaps him out of his comparison a bit, but doesn't deter him from staring.

Freckles adorn the apexes of both shoulders, sparsely scattered along the line of his spine. They remind him of constellations. He notes that Dream has dimples at the crux of his tailbone.

George's saliva goes down thick as syrup.

The fool, he has to remind himself.

And there's something else, but his eyes have yet to fully adjust to the light in the room. Parts of the man's skin are still swamped in blurry darkness.

But his keen ability to note the small aspects of Dream comes in handy, when George catches the sight of *lines* along the ridges of his shoulder blades.

At first, he thinks they're slight imprints of clothing wrinkles, or a trick of the light.

But fate has a way to taunt him at every turn, it seems. Because Dream shuffles, just slightly; the perfect amount of luminescence falling upon his skin.

Scratch marks.

A *lot* of them.

Obscene, abhorrent thoughts paint a vivid image of exactly *how* he got them, and George detests himself for it.

He hastily shuts his eyes and turns to face the wall. He doesn't care how loud he is.

Footsteps start up again. They move towards George's side of the room, and vague panic floods fear through his veins.

Soles pause beside his bed.

The dull golden light behind George's lids is snuffed out when Dream turns the lamp off. And he lingers. George knows the hesitation in his steps, when he eventually makes his way back towards

his own side.

He feels bile again; another strong wave of confusing nausea rising in the pit of his stomach. The vague sound of Dream climbing into bed echoes in the newfound vacancy of his brain.

But, for once, he can't pay attention to that. Because there's a storm brewing in his gut; images of acrylic nails digging trenches into unmarked skin filling the emptiness of his mind. Flashes of nail polish and pristine nail beds embellishing Dream's shoulder blades and waist with rakes of pleasurable red lines is enough to make his breathing speed up. He wonders absently if it was the girl who sat three rows down from him in chemistry.

His mind supplies him with the vision of her fake nails against hazel freckles.

God, he feels insane. Deplorable.

He mashes his reddened cheek into his pillow, squeezing his eyes to forcefully dispel his irrationality.

And George eventually falls asleep with uncertainty and bewilderment cradled in his palms.

He dreams of nothing.

Carmine and Acoustic

Chapter Summary

How something can sound so beautiful yet dangerous, George isn't sure.

Because Dream's music is peril incarnate.

It's the touch of a lover's hand, yet the sinking of claws into skin. It's the oxygen he breathes to live, yet the carbon monoxide corrupting his cells.

It's *hazardous*. It's *heavenly*.

Dream plays his guitar for George.

Chapter Notes

Hi hi! And welcome back to Dud Cigarettes!

I am super, *super* excited to share this chapter! I'm very proud of it, and I think a lot of you will be happy with the clothing choices for Dream.. ;)

This is a slow-burn: just a gentle reminder.

But! I hope you enjoy where I take their characterization, and I *really* enjoy their interactions and dialogue here.

ALSO! There's a song I use in this that you can listen to in the beginning if you want to follow along with the lyrics where they're incorporated. The song is 'Is Everybody Going Crazy?' by Nothing But Thieves! Highly recommend!!

As always, if Dream and/or George ever say they're no longer comfy with nsfw/shipping, this fic will be immediately taken down.

"Do you mind if I play for a bit?"

The sentence is hushed, melting easily with the low whistle of wind through the split and frayed gaps in the window screen. It's the first thing that's been uttered in well over an hour- the only sounds thus far being the scratch of pen on paper and the rustle of glossed textbook pages.

So, despite it's gentle delivery, the sound of Dream's honeyed voice still startles George, but only slightly. Because it seems his ears are chained to Dream at all times- addicted to the pull of his soul and trained to constantly seek his presence without permission.

Even if George doesn't realize it, he's been listening, observing, *appreciating*. All in complete silence.

His brain has been noting every crack of Dream's knuckles when they get stiff from hovering above his keyboard, every yawn he tries to stifle from staring at the glare of his screen for too long. He's been filing away each twirl of every ring, every stretch of strained muscles, every gentle hum of unknown tunes.

And he knows Dream is wearing a different type of tongue piercing today. It's embarrassing how he can *tell*, just by the sound it emits against perfectly-aligned teeth when he speaks.

So, *so* embarrassing.

But only for him- for *George*. Because no one else knows about this. Knows about how attuned he is to Dream, whether the blond is aware of it or not. The problem is that *George* knows, and that simple notion raises numerous red flags. So many, in fact, that whenever Dream is in focus, the world goes blurry with carmine fog, thick enough to choke on.

Red is a color that's been following him- *haunting* him.

And he's fucking *colorblind* .

But it's there. It's *definitely* there. In the print of his shoes as he walks across pavement, leaving a trail of unrequited desire in their wake. On the roof of his mouth when it opens to say Dream's name, crimson stained lips aching to release the flood of red lodged in his throat. It's embedded beneath his nails when visions of painted acrylics against tanned skin morph into his own, blunt fingertips.

Guilt is a heavy burden.

It grips his heart with an iron fist, and leaves George feeling *terrified*. Because *why* does he feel guilty? *Why* does he feel remorse building in his chest with each glance tossed to the man across

the room?

George *doesn't know*. And that's just his problem, isn't it?

"George."

God.

He loves how Dream says his name. There's an affectionate lilt to his inflection that George likes to think he reserves only for him. But he knows that's not true. It's just how Dream speaks, like each word is a lover and their letters are his vocal adoration. How his lips caress each vowel that leaves their plateau, overbrimming with addictive sugar and subtle grit.

George's feelings are confusing.

They're a maze, and he doesn't have a map. The only clue is a carbonated bottle of obsession, ready to burst at the seams, and the fervent taste of starvation. Hunger for something *so close* he can almost swallow it whole and quell the desire bubbling under his skin, yet unreachable- taunting him beyond vast walls and corridors he doesn't yet know how to traverse.

This feeling is not new.

But what *is* new is the sight of Dream, sitting on his bed, leaning against the wall, holding an item he's never seen before. George's breathing turns labored, and he nearly chokes at the sight of an abandoned, ebony case, lying ajar on the floor.

In palms George knows are supple and soft, lay a polished, acoustic guitar.

George can tell it's red, because of course it is.

Deft, large hands fumble with the knobs at the crest of the neck, adjusting a few chords absentmindedly. There's a yellow pick abandoned on the nightstand, alongside a cluster of silver rings.

Dream's fingers almost look naked, without them. But George finds he likes them more this way, because now cool-toned veins and defined tendons stick out like a sore thumb. His gaze lingers far too long on the movement to be considered normal.

George should speak before he loses his mind altogether.

"Sorry, what?" he asks. The pen he's been holding slips a little between slick fingers. He doesn't know when his hands got so sweaty.

Dream's mouth tilts up in a smirk, still focused on tuning the neglected instrument. "*I asked*," he starts with a drawl, "if you'd be okay with me playing for a bit, princess."

George's mouth goes dry. "Your guitar?"

He knows it was a stupid question, based on the bewildered look he's sent. It's merely a brief, fleeting glance, but it's enough to pin George in place on his comforter.

"No, my *trombone*," Dream quips with a roll to his eyes. "*Yes*, my guitar. I just wanted to make sure it was fine. I know you're studying, and stuff."

"I'm not," George says, a little too quickly. He winces, and backtracks a bit. "I mean, I *was*, I just haven't really been paying attention."

"Clearly."

Dream is looking at him with amusement in his eyes.

And George pretends to act unbothered, shrugging his shoulders and shoving his earbuds back in place. He spams the volume button, because maybe if his music is loud enough, it'll prevent him from slipping further into a pool of red. Prevent him from watching soft, *soft* fingertips dance across corded strings, prevent him from listening to jasmine-laden hums and rattles of gruff vocal cords.

There's something so *intimate* about listening to someone's music.

And George doesn't think he can bear it, not when it's Dream.

But before he can return what little focus he possesses to the messy, nearly-barren notebook pages on his lap, there's sharp movement from across the room. Dream's raising his arms, up, up, until his fingers can thread through oak strands.

George recognizes the movement instantly.

There's a hair tie caught between ivory teeth, head angled down to sweep half a crown of hair into a messy ponytail. Fringe falls in wisps to frame his face; *intentional*, almost, in the way they perfectly accent his high cheekbones and stark jawline.

The gods must look out for him. They must seat him on a throne and polish him shining for the world to see.

Their golden boy.

Practiced hands tighten the hair tie in place, tugging on neat ends until he deems it satisfactory. His eyes dart up when he finishes, and George doesn't look away. There's something swimming, *churning*, in those green eyes of his, a brow thrown up in silent question.

Another coy smirk paints his lips.

Nothing But Thieves blares in his ears. Heavy guitar and drums meant to distract him only end up making their held eye contact that much more poignant. George watches as Dream lowers his head to eye the neck of his guitar.

Fingers strum once, twice, across the strings. He adjusts, tunes, and nitpicks. George is deaf to it all. He's divided his attention between the blank paper in his lap and the personified addiction across the room.

Each time tanned digits, curved and delicate, carve their name into the chords, George forces

himself to look away.

With each strum, he's left to imagine what sort of notes and melodies are being sung into the air, what sort of soul is being poured into audible creation, what Dream can say without using words.

George swallows, and *listens*.

He can only hear his music's lyrics. They're annoyingly prevalent in his mind- loud enough to completely drown out his overwhelming urge to drink in the acoustic vibrations from the oxygen in the air.

'I just wanna go blur the line,

And leave our afflictions behind...'

There's more movement. Dream is hunched over his guitar now, eyes fluttered shut against ruddy cheeks and lips parting around words that fall upon deaf ears.

'The sky is coming down,

I know it's strange,

But heaven's a mindset away...'

George feels as if he's floating, observing Dream. Like he's drifted from the shell of this room into a cloud-lined haven- thick with allure and intrigue. Dream *melts* into his focus, a veil of serenity falling over his expression. It softens the corners of his eyes, swells his cheeks, and creates a canvas *preened* to be appreciated by the world's eyes.

And George can't look away.

'Yeah, everybody's going crazy,

Can't get through to you lately,

We're so hopelessly faded...'

He's a trainwreck. George is a trainwreck. On course, speeding straight for a barricade. Maybe he was always meant to end up like this; hurtling toward his doom at an impossible rate.

Falling faster, and *faster*, into his own personal hell.

'Is anyone else feeling lonely?

It just can't be me only,

Losing our cool so slowly...'

Euphoria is so close. It's kissing the tips of his fingers, teasing him with it's pleasurable touch. He grasps for it, achingly, but it slips away again.

Dream sits up straight, and tips his head back against the wall. His wrists continue their flicks and strikes against the guitar, but George isn't looking at that, anymore. Instead, he's fixated on the delicate arch to Dream's neck, the sliding of his Adam's apple against the layer of taut skin leading down to sharp collarbones. He's eyeing the tight flicker and flex of tendons. His carotid is in there, somewhere. Drowning in crimson and pumping red through Dream's veins; his *soul*, his *essence*.

'It would feel so good to,

Steal some time...'

George inhales, and his vision goes cerise.

'It would feel so good to,

Make you mine...'

He pauses his music.

The room feels silent with the absence of heavy rock. There's a slight ringing in the base of his neck as his ears slowly readjust to the quietness of the dorm.

He keeps the earbuds in. They're all for show; acting as his internal alibi, a way to dissolve his incessant itch to listen to forbidden music.

There's poison in the air, and all George wants to do is taste it.

By the time the first few chords reach the grasp of his ears, George is practically *leaning* towards Dream, like he's a magnet, drawing him in with an invisible pull.

Waves lap at the shore of George's mind when soft melodies tangle around the fragile exterior of his heart; they slip between the slats of his ribs and seep toxins into his bloodstream. If he listens hard enough, he can almost pick up on the drip of rainfall on pavement, the sizzle of a cigarette against ash, the brush of leaves on leaves during cloudburst.

How something can sound so beautiful yet dangerous, George isn't sure.

Because Dream's music is peril incarnate.

It's the touch of a lover's hand, yet the sinking of claws into skin. It's the oxygen he breathes to live, yet the carbon monoxide corrupting his cells.

It's *hazardous*. It's *heavenly*.

Dream is humming, too. Vocal chords striking vibrations against each other to create sin itself-infecting George from the inside out, resonating through his limbs long after the sound ceases to exist. And George doesn't know when he started staring, again. But he is, and he can't look away.

There's a furrow to Dream's brows that wasn't there before. It forms a tight crease between them-normally-smooth skin pulled taut to reflect some sort of emotion George doesn't understand.

The song sounds sad. Enchanting and bewitchingly deceptive. Gentle hands pour coldness into each music note, just barely-there.

At the same time a particularly loud chord is strummed, Dream's neck falls lax, and it lolls to the side. Oakwood eyelashes flutter open, and their gazes lock.

The last vibration lingers; finality in the way it's delivered, yet refusing to die all at once.

Somehow, George thinks the last note will never leave him.

And now, the room is shockingly still. The breeze has ceased, as have the chirps of finches outside their window. George doesn't even think his heart is beating anymore.

Dream has whispered treacherous poison through his soul. His heart doesn't feel like his own anymore, with its heavy presence in his veins.

George is sure he looks crazy right now. Staring wide-eyed, lips parted as he attempts to snatch his breathing back from newfound clean air. Dream looks like he's waiting for something, when he eventually leans forward to rest his forearms on the smooth side-paneling of the guitar. He lays his head down on top of them, and smiles a bit. His eyes close again.

He looks almost like he could fall asleep. More hair escapes the clutches of his hair tie- the gods blessing him once more with perfectly-placed cascading, honeyed locks.

George finds himself speaking without permission. He's been doing that a lot lately.

"You're good at that."

His voice sounds like it's been through hell and emerged broken beyond repair. Maybe it has.

And then he remembers that he still has his earbuds in. A pit forms a sinkhole in his stomach. But he knows it's too late; Dream will know he's been listening either way. He just *will*.

Peaceful eyes crack open again, finding shattered umber ones with ease.

"I'm good at a lot of things, Georgie," he murmurs, absentmindedly drumming his fingers against the hollow, scarlet wood of his guitar. His cheek mashes against his arm as he buries his face more firmly into the comfort of warm skin.

George finds enough energy in himself to roll his eyes.

Dream is arrogant; annoyingly confident and good at every little thing. But maybe he has a right to be, with how infatuated everyone seems to be with him. George is no exception to this, of course. He inhales sharply, and tears his eyes away from Dream.

Biting his lip, George lightheartedly tosses back, “Like what?”

It can be perceived as a tease. As a playful remark; meant to evoke brief laughter and vanish from memories as quick as it came. But there’s an open-endedness to the question that George purposefully leaves, silently praying for Dream to take it.

He wants to learn. Wants to *listen*. Wants to *understand* the man behind his obsession.

There’s a few beats of silence, and Dream looks like he’s mulling his answer over. A brief flash of uncertainty flickers across his expression, but George blinks, and it’s gone.

Maybe he’d imagined it.

Dream looks smug again, and another smirk breaks out across his lips.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” he says, eventually.

Yes.

George’s thoughts are *loud*.

I want to know everything there is to know. I want to see through you. I want to map you out. I don’t know why, but I want you to break and split for me. I don’t know anything, so teach me. Tell me.

But instead, he says nothing.

Dream's guitar is concealed by a thick case of black leather once more, propped against the foot of the bed frame, locked away with a key made of acid. George can't hold it; it'll burn his hands and scald his insides if he tries. But for Dream, it fits perfectly; like it belongs there, *made* to continuously simmer against tanned skin and burrow welts into his heart.

It looks painful, holding that much power.

It makes George wonder when it'll be that he can hear Dream's music again. And it makes him even *more* confused. He hates it.

Wetting his lips and leaning back, George allows himself to slip, just a little, into the churning sea of red nipping at his toes.

"Why haven't you played your guitar before?"

Dream is turned away from him, shoving a folder into the worn backpack against his nightstand. There's a minute tensing of his limbs, pausing.

Click, click, click.

George has learned relatively fast that Dream can't keep still. The clink of his jewelry against his teeth is a habit of his; whether it's out of nervousness or impatience, George doesn't know. Just like he doesn't know anything else, it seems.

One last strike of metal against enamel, and Dream is straightening with his backpack in hand. The strap is thrown around his shoulder, and, curiously, his gaze turns to the floor.

It's unlike him.

"I only play it when I have a reason to," Dream says with a slight smile- smooth, yet boiling as freshly-brewed tea. Some drops hit George's bare skin, burning through tissue and eating him alive. He sees red again, and tastes smoke.

Dream is out the door to class without another utterance.

And George tries to tend to the wounds he'd afflicted, but nothing seems to heal the poison embedded into his bloodstream, or the charred wounds on his skin from where Dream's words had seared their name, or the ailment tangled in knots around his heart.

So, he stumbles around with an injured soul for the rest of the day.

He doesn't understand Dream. But that's not new.

It's Friday, and George is thinking.

Probably not a good idea, when he's walking on wet asphalt. Today it's raining, and George has his hood pulled up over his ears; an attempt to fend off the torrent overhead.

Larger droplets *plop* on his head as he passes beneath a tree. Around him, students scatter, seeking shelter and warm beds. But George is walking slow, today. He's padding through puddles and allowing humidity to fill his lungs. He gives the Earth time to smell of damp soil and slick pavement, because it reminds him of the man he's supposed to be avoiding.

And he *has* been doing that for a week now.

They've maybe said a handful of words to each other, mostly in passing, and mostly from Dream's end. The blond seems to be trying harder for conversation nowadays, and the reason eludes George, as always.

He gets up before Dream in the morning, and falls asleep while he's out in the evening.

George had come home on Wednesday night to a stale Asiago bagel and a sticky note on top:

'They gave me an extra

Figured you'd be back soon so u can have it :).'

He stared at the note for a long time. It was hard to ignore the taste of nightshade on his tongue or the deep frown to his lips. Because he glanced to his left, and Dream was asleep in his bed. It was only ten at night, that day, and George had avoided his dorm like the plague. The curiosity of why Dream was home so soon was drowned out by vague regret.

He still feels guilty about it.

It's not that big of a deal, and George knows it. But the mere *thought* of Dream scribbling a note for him in the morning, only to come back late with it still sitting untouched makes the red in his vision nearly blinding.

A lone bead of rainfall caresses the curve of his cheek. It dips into the crease of his lips, and somehow seeps through onto his tongue.

Something vaguely *Dream* kisses his tastebuds, when the droplet settles. A cigarette butt gets crushed by his shoe as he drags his feet forward.

There's a person passing him, and George recognizes the gait, the shoes, and, *oh god*, the legs. Terror stiffens his limbs, and he puts his head down. Hastily, he shrugs his hood more firmly over his head and pleads for mercy.

Mercy never *has* had him in its favor, has it?

Because those shoes stop, then still for a moment, before swiveling on pavement and crunching drenched pebbles beneath their soles. George braces himself, but it does little to stop him from jolting at a light touch to his shoulder.

"George?"

His breathing goes unsteady. Fear floods his veins when he turns around, and immediately, he

regrets doing it.

She's standing there, swaddled in an oversized jumper and an excitable look on her face.

His ex.

Smiling has always suited her lips, her cheeks, her eyes. They twinkle with mirth and joy at every stretch of her mouth, every high-pitched giggle, every passion-laced word that leaves the sunburst of her soul.

It crushes him.

It fucking *crushes* him.

Because here he is, dressed in sweats and a gray hoodie drenched black from rain, bags beneath his eyes and poison in his heart.

"Hey," he croaks back. He almost can't get it out, from where it's lodged in his throat.

And she just smiles even more, and tucks a stray lock of damp hair behind her ear with an amount of grace only she can possess.

"How are you? I was going to text you later today, actually, just to check in and stuff," she says, unbothered, confident. "You found a place, right? I realized I never asked."

George musters up something vaguely akin to a smile, and shoves his fists into his pockets. They curl into the fabric of his sweatshirt, clinging onto something, *anything*. "Yeah, yeah I did, I think. Thank you."

The sentence is clipped, unsure and wavering.

She tilts her head a bit. Her hair, curled loosely from the humidity in the air, swishes with the movement. Somehow, it's elegant, shiny, and perfect, even in the rain. "You *think*?" She grows

confused.

“I mean, I *did*. I did. Sorry,” he stumbles, chewing the inside of his cheek until it’s shredded. “I’m just stressed. Exams, and all.”

She still looks uncertain, yet steadfast- a frown tugging at her petaled lips. Sadness floods the hazel pools of her eyes. She eventually looks away, severing their locked gazes. Sorrow doesn’t suit her. Nothing feels worse than this, when she grinds the toe of her shoe into the ground, and clenches her fists in a way she thinks is subtle. But George catches it. And nothing could have prepared him for her next words.

“You’re still the same.”

The Earth seems to vanish from beneath his feet, and he’s falling, falling, deeper into hell. He swallows down nails and shards of glass. The overwhelming smell of soaked asphalt soothes his broken insides, if just a little. His eyes settle on the crushed cigarette butt on the ground, practically smoothed to dust.

If he focuses, he can almost taste secondhand smoke.

“I know,” he grits out, “but I’m trying to figure it out. I really am.”

She’s unmoving. There’s no reassurance, no disagreement. Just... silence.

It scares him.

And he doesn’t know if he can take another beating this week, this year, this *lifetime*. Because he’s already shattered like porcelain a dozen times over again, and there’s nobody to pick up the pieces. Nobody to meticulously put him back together the way he would do for so many others.

George doesn’t know if he’ll live after this.

But then, mercy seems to change its mind. Because suddenly there’s a hand on his shoulder, and a trapdoor opens deep in his stomach, plunging another bout of deadly sin through his limbs. The

hand is soft and large. George can tell, even through two layers of clothing.

Heavy, cool rings are there, even if he can't see them.

"George," the devil behind him says. George shudders, and wonders if he feels the action through his palm. "What are you *doing* out here?" Dream moves to his side, but George doesn't look up. He shuffles his feet, instead.

He opens his mouth, steeling himself to introduce his personified demons. Squeezing his eyes shut and praying for relief, he begins, "Dream, this is- "

But she cuts him off; not out of rudeness, but out of self-assured excitement. "Oh! *You're* Dream?"

Another trapdoor falls open from beneath his feet. She knows Dream. Of course she does.

"Yeah, that's me." He says it like how he says George's name. He feels somewhat ill. "I'm George's roommate. I was actually kind of looking for him. Sorry for interrupting."

She laughs, boisterous and ear-catching. She's starlight incarnate; bright and bubbly and lovely. The hand on George's shoulder tightens minutely, and he wonders why it's still there.

"Then don't mind me, at all. We were just catching up a bit. I *thought* I recognized you from English class, but I wasn't sure," she says, all smiles and cherry lips.

George allows himself to look up at Dream. He's smiling too, all glinting metal and deadly addiction. "Yeah, thought I recognized you, too. You okay if I steal him for a bit?"

Her hands fly up, waving dismissively in the air. "No, no, go ahead. I've got to get to class anyway, and I'm *soaked*, oh gosh," she exclaims as she brushes stray damp strands from her eyes. But, for a moment, she pauses, and her gaze flickers between him and Dream, intense and inquisitive. Knowing calmness floods her expression when realization overtakes her features.

Peace.

And George *detests* it. Because he *doesn't fucking understand why*.

“Nice catching up with you, Gogy. And it’s lovely to finally meet you, Dream. I feel like everyone talks about you, but you leave class before I can properly introduce myself.”

Dream shoots her a polite, knowing look, and nods. “I get that a lot. Nice to meet you, too.”

She offers a smile, a laugh, and a wave, before turning heel and walking away from them.

Once she’s gone, George feels like a shell of a man. He feels sick; shaky and anxiety-ridden, heart hammering against his ribcage and hands slick with sweat. The palm on his shoulder slides down to splay at the middle of his back. He doesn’t know if it makes things better or worse.

But then, Dream *snorts*. It’s a choked laugh, so unlike his usual low chuckles and light wheezes. George looks at him, speechless, and he looks back.

“Gogy?”

The nickname threatens to bring back rose-tinted memories; threatens to flood his vision and leave an aching bitterness on his tongue. As if washing the feeling away, he swallows. Defeated and exhausted, George just shakes his head and sighs.

“She’d call me that, sometimes. I don’t even know where it came from.”

Dream’s still laughing, but he moves to stand in front of George, rather to his side. The warmth of his hand leaves it’s spot. Coolness floods the area, and George feels even more empty.

It’s then that he registers Dream’s clothing.

Despite the pouring rain, he’s dressed in black jean shorts and a baggy sweater, tucked into a cinched waist and sleeves rolled up to his wrists. There’s nothing to stop the rain from flattening his hair, so it hangs loose and wet in his face, slightly wavy as it sweeps along the nape of his neck.

Droplets sear wet tracks down his face. His eyeliner's smudged, and George looks down. He *has* to.

And, *oh*.

He isn't sure what he expected, when his eyes settle on the long expanse of Dream's legs.

But it sure as hell wasn't *fishnets*. Because that's what blanket the entirety of his thighs and calves, disappearing up the hems of his shorts and down the tops of his sneakers.

George is staring.

He's never seen a man look good in fishnets. But they suit Dream. They *really* do.

"You like them," Dream says, smug. And, once again, it isn't poised as a question. It's a *fact*- a known statement. And while it's a bit humiliating, George doesn't think he can speak, so he crushes the words stuck in his throat into a nod.

There's a bit of silence, then.

The patter of rain on grass and concrete interrupts it, and a stray bird's cry slices through the air only once. George is grateful Dream isn't pressing him about his ex, nor how he's been pointedly avoiding the dorm for a whole week.

Instead of being angry, upset, or exasperated, Dream just smiles- carmine dribbling from silver-adorned lips. George nearly chokes on it.

"Come on," he says. "We should talk."

Dream takes him to a coffee shop.

It's a relatively small establishment, nestled between two larger buildings and a few trees. It's more run-down than the surroundings, with characteristic crumbling concrete walls and ivy vines snaked up its sides. But Dream lacks any hesitation as he opens the door to let George in first.

The exterior does little justice to its homeyness and welcoming atmosphere. It's warmly-lit- oak planks lining the walls and fashionable booths scattered along the edges. A chimney sits unused at the far end, awaiting colder months to approach.

The menu is eye-catchingly scrawled on a colorful chalkboard above their heads. There's the loud whirr of an espresso machine, and George lets the smell of coffee beans and wood fill his lungs and simmer there. He feels calmer, already.

It's not until they sit in a booth butted against a fogged glass window that he *realizes*.

"Dream," he starts. The man spares him a glance. "I thought you hated coffee?"

And maybe this question reveals just how closely George pays attention to everything *Dream*, because he's deduced this preference completely out of silent observation. A small wash of color floods his cheeks. He's afraid he's given himself away, if he hasn't done so already, just out of how often he *stares*.

But, when he looks up, he's surprised to find *Dream* looking to the side, a flicker of flushed embarrassment passing through forest-green eyes. It's brief, but there.

"I know. I do, but," he pauses, blinks, and snatches his lip ring between his teeth, tugging slightly, "I know *you* like it. And I've been here a few times, so I figured it'd be a good place to stop by." George's brows draw together, because he's never *once* told Dream about his love for coffee. Some strange sort of mix between relief and hope coils in his gut. Dream seems to catch on to his perplexion fast.

"What, you thought I wouldn't notice? George, you come home with near-empty iced coffees *everyday*. It was pretty easy to see you liked it."

He says this as if it's obvious. So blunt and factual that it convinces George into believing it is just

that. *Obvious*. Everything about his character is painfully, *blaringly*, obvious. He's not special; not someone to fawn over and appreciate the littler details of.

The fool, the fool, the fool.

George picks at the scuffed wood of the table. He purses his lips, and refuses to meet Dream's eyes. "Yeah, it was pretty obvious. You're right."

They don't say much, despite the fact Dream dragged him here under the pretense to converse. Instead, George sips on a double-shot vanilla latte, and Dream fidgets with his rings, a glass of iced tea to his right. The condensation on the surface drips onto the glossed table in sync with the rain on the window.

It's jasmine tea- his favorite. Somehow, George already assumed this.

The waiter comes around, eventually, and Dream starts clicking his tongue piercing again. It hadn't happened much tonight, which is a rare feat. He rests his chin in his palm, looking up through black-smudged lashes at the waiter, offering a smile and a request for a slice of coffee cake. The man seems to linger a bit before returning to his station. Dream looks smug, but that's hardly unusual.

It's when George starts to think the downpour may finally ease up that Dream finally speaks.

"Do you like the rain, George?"

And he blinks a few times at that. Stares at where Dream is facing the window- sharp, defined profile illuminated by the dreary light filtering through slick glass. It catches on his lip ring, and George decides his jewelry *definitely* looks better in natural lighting.

"Yeah, I do," he replies. *He doesn't.*

But he knows Dream does. Because he stays inside on the days it rains; chipping away at calculus and English with one eye trained on the swirling gray and rattling brush outside.

Dream rhythmically taps his fingers against the table. It has the same count as the song he'd played on the guitar. "Me too. I love the rain."

I know.

George says nothing back.

"But I'm afraid of thunder, you know?"

Now *this* grabs George's attention. Because *no*, he had no idea.

And that's a rarity for him, because George prides himself on knowing all of Dream's littlest details, all his microscopic scuff marks and miniscule dents. Eyes are back on him, all of a sudden, and George has a hard time not squirming, under the intensity of Dream's gaze.

"I know, unfortunate, right?" he muses. "Lightning scares the shit outta me, too."

Confusion feels strangely foreign in George's mind.

He's constantly floundering through life nowadays; reaching for solutions and comprehension that always seems to evade him somehow. But this is the *one* thing he thought he understood. And it *stings*, to know he doesn't.

So he gapes, grasping for words that tease the tip of his tongue. "Then why... why do you like...?"

It's all he manages.

Dream throws up an eyebrow, and slides his index finger through the droplets sticking to his tea glass. The movement makes the back of George's throat stick to his tongue. "I dunno. Everything about rain makes me feel like I'm floating. In a good way, obviously. But being out in it is always a risk for me." He pauses. A canine-laden smirk paints his lips. "And that just makes me love it more."

The statement brews in George's mind. He turns it over, and over, until it's dissolved into questions that can't quite form.

"George," he murmurs, "you don't know me. *That's* what I'm trying to get at, here."

The waiter passes by, and sets a plate of coffee cake on the edge of the table. Dream snaps his eyes up. There's something swimming in them that makes George feel like a starving man, and, strangely, he wishes- *aches*- that Dream would lay those eyes on him; ones holding that same sweltering emotion.

"I know," George responds with difficulty.

Dream stares at the waiter as he retreats. He doesn't bother looking back in George's direction when he speaks again, soft and tired-sounding.

"Do you?" Dream is frowning. It's off-putting on his normally carefree face.

George doesn't know what to say, so Dream speaks again.

"You should tell me about her."

Doe eyes go wide with alarm, anxiety stutters the beat of his heart, and sand coats his tongue. His breathing picks up. "*What?*"

Leaning back in his seat, Dream fixes George with an unreadable expression. "I'm a curious guy. And..." he pauses, resolve straightening his features, "I think I'll understand you more if you tell me what happened."

George *wants* to feel conflicted. He *wants* to feel frustration bubble up his throat at the fact that Dream's trying to pry. But George is a weak, *weak* man. And he's desperate to just *spill his soul* out to someone; *anyone*, who may be willing to pick up his shattered pieces, no matter how slim the chance.

When he's silent for a few more moments, Dream continues with a sigh. It sounds exasperated. "Okay, *fine*, then." His eyes flutter shut against his cheeks. "I'm allergic to *Tide* detergent, I have ADHD, and I've never dated anyone," Dream states, punctual and sturdy. That last one sticks like glue against George's rib cage. "Now you know more about me, princess. Tell me about her, will you?"

It's nearly suffocating, just how thickly Dream lays the question on him. But his mind is *racing* away from him, turning heel and kicking dust up in its haste to flee anywhere but where he wants it .

Dream's never dated anyone. He's never dated anyone. Dream. Dream's never-

"There's not much to tell," George shakily replies before he can think twice about it.

"You're lying, George."

A few nervous, rattling laughs escape the clutches of George's throat. "Well, you're kind of putting me on the spot, *Dream*."

A pink tongue juts out between ivory teeth, glinting metal piercing catching between the gaps. Smiling with blindingly-red lips, Dream eases up a bit. "You're right, I know. But to be fair," he leans back, and George nearly chokes when a fishnet-clad leg hoists up to tuck towards his chest, "I'm kind of sick of pussyfooting around you. We've been living together for, like, a month, and I've only been able to discern *one* thing about you."

It's George's turn to quirk an eyebrow up. "And what is that?"

Click, click, click.

"I won't tell. Because I don't even think *you* know it, either."

If his reality had the ability to get even more confusing, George thinks this is the peak. It *must* be. Because even a fucking *stranger* knows more about him than he does. His mood depletes a bit, and he feels *drained*, all of a sudden.

He decides he doesn't really care anymore. With a rattling breath, George stares out the window; stares at mist on pavement and trickling droplets down leaves. Stares at his distorted reflection, looking tiredly back. He can't even recognize the face he sees, anymore.

"She was the best person I've ever had in my life, I think," he starts. Mimicking Dream, he brings a leg to his chest, and rests a cheek against a damp knee. He feels like his clothes will never dry after tonight. "I loved her, for a while. I don't know. We met right after highschool and she was just always so... *herself*."

The sky splits open again, and another burst of thundering rain hammers against the window. The world goes a bit darker. George's reflection grows clearer.

"Like, she never really cared what people thought about her, and she had *so* many plans," he continues. A frown crosses his lips. "And so did I, back then. But her plans were a bit more stable than mine, so I applied here, instead of the west coast, where I thought I wanted to go. We both took a gap year and got accepted, obviously."

Almost, just *almost*, a rosey smile threatens to break out over his face, when he recalls her sunny voice crackling through the phone, cheering and crinkling her acceptance letter right into the mic, just so George knew it was there. But his face falls, when he remembers that he'd gotten his letter two weeks before hers. He never said anything about it- letting the paper rot away on his table day after day. Because he would go wherever she went, and if the letter never arrived at her doorstep, he could just say he didn't get one, either.

And, back then, he thought it was because of love. Thought it was because he couldn't bear to be without her, by her side, everyday.

But now, he knows that it was because she offered confidence; *stability*. Something that he could hold onto and follow blindly.

A constant in his confusing, dead-end life.

"So we went to school together and had a pretty good few years. At least, I think we did," George murmurs, pursing his lips to keep himself from untying the knots he'd secured around his heart long ago. "But, over the summer... I realized I wasn't in love with her anymore."

Dream's been silent through this, but an inquisitive glare catches in the pupil of his eye at this. It's

like he's peering through George's *soul*, staring at him like that. He squirms in his seat.

"And what made you think that? That you weren't in love with her anymore?"

If George wasn't feeling so exhausted, he'd almost say he could sense some sort of glimmery hope in the way Dream presents the question. Like he's trying to coax a certain answer out of George.

And he could answer truthfully.

He could tell Dream all about the distancing, the rejection of touches and kisses, the inability to lay his hands upon her hips and chest like he once could. The frustration on her tongue when he had no excuse for his feelings; no way to talk them through the mess he'd put them in.

He could spill his guilt onto the table, churn it up and spit it into Dream's jasmine tea, watch as he swallows it down with a swipe to his lips.

But he does no such thing. He *can't*, not when he doesn't *understand*. Not when he's still haunted by nightmares of the day she'd stormed off. Not when remorse still makes him sick late into the night, physical nausea scorching his throat until it stings his eyes.

So he answers the only way he knows how.

"I don't know."

And maybe there's a bit of truth to the statement.

Some sort of contentment falls between Dream's brows, smoothing them out flat. He offers to share the coffee cake, which George accepts rather timidly. They pick at it with little chatter between.

The waiter slides the check on the table after a while, and Dream pays, all courteous looks and smiling eyes, before folding the slip of paper neatly into his back pocket. There's a dopey expression upon his features, and his hands keep fleeing to his pocket; small, nearly-unnoticeable gestures, as if he's making sure it's still there.

But, George tries not to analyze it. He really, *really* tries.

Instead, he sips at his now-cold coffee, and Dream nurses his dwindling tea. They wait out the storm until it dies altogether. And when it does, George is seeing red again.

Because Dream makes him see color.

And George doesn't know if that's a good thing, yet.

Life and reality is failing him.

He tries to hold it in his palms, but, like disintegrating grains of sand, it slips through the slots of his knuckles and is swept away by the passage of time.

So, George turns his attention to studying. He pours himself into his work; day and night, slaving away at nearly-indecipherable excerpts and statistics problems. There's a pad and pencil in his backpack wherever he goes on campus.

He doesn't listen to music anymore.

There's this sort of aching fear in his chest that tells him he'll end up connecting and comparing every song to Dream's; to melodic guitar strums and buttery hums. It's enough for him to toss his earbuds in his side drawer, collecting more and more dust day after day.

Dream's started bringing him vanilla lattes alongside his asiago bagels every now and then. It's a kind gesture, but neither of them note the change.

This was how he woke up this morning: a steaming coffee and bagel on his nightstand, Dream

sitting against his bed headboard with a laptop perched on crossed knees. George's chest felt like it was melting at the sight, tongue heavy like soaked cotton in his mouth and a flutter to his pulse.

It had made him feel inexplicably ill.

With bile at the back of his throat, George hastily shoved the bagel into his backpack and told Dream he'd be back late. *Very* late.

Because everytime he so much as *glanced* Dream's way, he felt like he was choking, *gasping*, on scarlet emotions. Dream had offered a nod and a dorky thumbs-up, and George was *gone*. He spent his day lingering in cafeterias and skirting the edge of a fountain, tip-toeing along the foot-trodden paths in a garden and studying in a multitude of places. He'd been to every library on campus, seen every residential building there is to see, and sat in every chair of his chemistry lecture hall (he pointedly avoided the third row from the back).

And he eventually finds himself back at the coffee shop, warmth seeping from the cracks in the foundation and beneath the door. He convinces himself it's because he has nowhere else to go, but that's not true.

Even the gods know it.

He seats himself where Dream had last, soaking up the rays of sunlight streaming from the window panes. The waiter who had served them a few days prior isn't working today. Instead, a polite older woman comes around with a smile and a drawl to her words. And he must be going crazy. *Has* to be. Because George swears he orders a coffee, or maybe an apple cider, but when she returns, there's suddenly a jasmine tea set in front of him.

He's never been a particularly big fan, but he leisurely sips on it anyway. Why he does it eludes him.

By the time the clock rolls into nine p.m., George has run out of places to be and things to do. It brings a grimace to his face, when he ultimately decides it'd be best to bite the bullet and head back. There are stones in his soles and barbells upon his shoulders, dragging his feet begrudgingly in the direction of his residence hall.

Idly, George wonders what Dream did today. He wonders if he's out right now, like he usually is during this time of night. Wonders if there's a new body keeping him warm in some unfamiliar bed

across campus. Wonders if he brings that body a latte and a bagel every other day, wonders if he whispers carmine sin into their ears with guitar serenades, wonders if he takes them out to new cafes because he knows they enjoy the taste of coffee.

In his mind, George can almost convince himself that he's special. That Dream treats him differently; treats him *better* than these substitutes of human companionship he seeks each night.

But, as his feet eventually round the corner to his dorm room, he thinks he must be sorely mistaken.

Because there he is. The man of his daydreams, his nightmares, his conflicting morality. His back is towards him, but George knows it's Dream. He'd recognize any angle of this man, as embarrassing as it is to admit. Draped over his shoulders is a cropped tee, thin and fraying. His midriff is bared to George's eyes, and he can't find it in himself to look away. Can't tear his gaze from rippling lumbar muscles and dimples stamped just above the hem of peeking briefs. Sweats hang low on his hips, just barely clinging to the subtle swell of muscle and fat on his upper thighs.

And maybe George is distracting himself by taking in his attire and appreciating tanned, exposed skin. Maybe he's trying to stall.

No, he *definitely* is. Trying to stall the ache in his chest, the tar pit expanding in his stomach, the nauseating confusion building in his throat.

Because Dream isn't alone.

There are arms hooked around his neck and shoulders, clinging dainty fingers into thin fabric and riding his crop-top further upwards. There's a smaller leg between Dream's thighs, and his hands are gripping into a small waist, pressing fingerprint-sized divots and ring-indentations into soft skin. He's got her pressed against the wall adjacent to their door, and George feels like his limbs have solidified into cement.

It's as if he's rooted in place, eyes wide as planets and a paleness searing across his cheeks.

Listening to soft moans and slick-kissed sounds makes George's insides turn into hell itself. He doesn't know what to do, so he just turns around. He'll sleep at the library, or his friend's dorm, or *fuck*, maybe just the garden out back.

Anywhere but here. He can't fucking *stand it*, and the worst part, is he doesn't understand *why*.

But he refuses to address the perplexing storm of emotions in his chest. Instead, he forces his mind to go blank; for numbness to sweep through his limbs and an echo to reverberate in his skull. He makes his footsteps light as feathers, guiding them in the direction of the stairwell.

It's one thing for George to *imagine*. For him to craft his own image of Dream's rendez-vous in the evenings, for him to blur the bodies and faces that keep his roommate company on nights like these.

But, it's entirely different when it's *real*. Tangible. *Visible*.

These aren't specially-crafted images anymore. They're *reality*. And reality is still failing him, *horribly*.

Salvation seems so close, when the exit sign paints his skin a luminous scarlet. Toes round the corner. The rest of his body is about to follow suit. So close, *so close*.

"George?"

Fate breathes down his neck.

Ice freezes over the numbness in his veins. Horror, *thunderous fear*, grips his bones and makes his stride die in the carpet beneath his heels.

Whitened knuckles claw into the strap of his backpack, when George's clumsy feet *somehow* manage to turn him around. He tries to blink slower, as if it'll somehow prolong the time it takes him to see what awaits his gaze.

But, eventually, his vision unblurs, and everything he's been dreading clogs his senses.

Dream is standing there, disheveled, wide-eyed, and slightly out of breath. Oak strands messily splay in every direction, and George does his best to not think about the hands that made them this way. Subtle scratch marks and bursted capillaries decorate the column of his throat. George hates

to admit that they look good on him.

And his lips. *God*, his lips are bright red, kiss-bitten and slick with spit that's not his own.

But when George's eyes meet startled green ones, everything else fades into the background. Because Dream looks *panicked*, and George has never seen him lose his composure like this. It's so *unlike* him, so *foreign*, when Dream's pupils flood with anxiety and blatant worry.

George swallows down bitterness (envy, anger, *disgust?*), clearing the sand from his throat. "Hey," he grits out. "Sorry, I was just leaving. Sorry."

He's apologizing. *Why is he apologizing?*

And Dream seems to think the same, with the way he throws his hands in the air and waves dismissively, shaking his head. "No, no, it's my fault. Thought you said you'd be back really late. Guess I overestimated." He tacks on a nervous chuckle. George doesn't reciprocate.

It's awkward. It's fucking *awkward*, and George's skin is crawling. And where Dream usually slices the tension with easygoing jokes and a carefree smile, he lacks in presence. Instead, his mouth is glued shut, metal jewelry idle and silent.

It's suffocating.

"Dream?"

A meek voice snaps George from his staring a bit. It's then that he remembers the other soul in the hall, the one who had been behind mussed up golden hair and had made a mess of tanned skin and hazel freckles. It makes the bitterness lingering on his tongue multiply in intensity.

A figure emerges behind Dream.

Curiosity is a *disease*. An ailment. One that seeps into his joints and bloodstream; urging his eyes to take in the limbs, face, hands, nails, and palms that had touched Dream in a way he'd only imagined.

And the first thing that George notices... is that she's not a *she* at all.

A smaller, thin man fiddles with the skin between his knuckles, clad in casual clothes and lingering by Dream's side. George is looking around. He's investigating the hall behind Dream, searching for hidden exits he might've not known about. But nowhere does the girl exist. The one he thought he'd seen pinned against a wall just minutes prior. Pinned beneath ring-enhanced fingers and large palms.

She's vanished.

But what still permeates is the blistering blush across the man's cheeks, the plump irritation of kissed lips, and the way his thin fingers perfectly match the ones he'd seen gripping the collar of Dream's cropped tee.

The carpet is pulled out from beneath him when he *realizes* .

It's the fucking *waiter*.

The waiter from a few days ago, from when Dream had bought George his first vanilla latte and admitted he'd never dated anyone. From when they'd spent an afternoon in soaked clothes and slowly-spilt secrets.

George feels like a fucking *idiot*. He feels like...

Fuck. He feels like the damned *fool*.

Nothing is clicking in his head. Because Dream likes *women*. He beds pretty girls, makes them remember him enough to whisper his name all over campus like a shared secret. He leaves his sweatshirts with them because he likes them, he *fucks* them, because *Dream likes girls*. He does. He *does*. George knows this. *He knows this*.

Doesn't he?

George can't move, can't *peak*, as he observes Dream turn towards the man, a polite, apologetic smile on his lips. They murmur a few hushed words to each other, exchange a fleeting kiss, and then the waiter is brushing past George, towards the exit. Enraptured giggles fly off his tongue and tumble into the tar pit in George's gut.

When he's gone, Dream is already unlocking their dorm. Like he's already forgotten about the man with infatuation swarming his insides, who's not even out of the building yet. Like he's throwing away the body he decided should keep him warm tonight.

George follows with tentativeness weighing down his steps. They're silent, once inside.

He feels irrationally angry, confused, *nauseous*. Throwing up was *not* on his agenda tonight, but it might just be, if his stomach keeps rolling like foaming white-capped waves during a hurricane. He doesn't think he's blinked once, since stepping inside. It's like his body's stopped functioning, because *Dream likes girls. He likes girls. He likes waiters. He likes waiters with tiny waists and dark eyes and dainty fingers and-*

"George," Dream's voice is startling in the overwhelming smog of screaming thoughts. And George whips his head up, desperate to latch onto something grounded in reality.

His is fucking *failing him*. Like *always*.

"Are you okay, George?" he asks. There's genuine concern in those eyes of his, brows drawn together and a frown to his lips. "Look, I'm sorry about all this, I really am. Didn't mean for you to see that."

After blinking back watery dryness from wide brown eyes, George scrambles to respond. "I didn't... I thought you liked girls."

Maybe he shouldn't have scrambled for *that*. Because George's face *ignites*, fiery embarrassment scorching the planes of pale cheeks. "I mean-" he goes to fix himself. But before he can, Dream is crossing the room.

There's a mission in his eyes; vague satisfaction and amusement sidled next to it. All worry and nervousness once held in them vanishes; quick as the brevity of a lightning strike. He halts right in front of George. The brow adorned with silver studs raises, curious and questioning.

“I do,” Dream ensures.

It solves some hungry part of George’s soul. It reconfirms at least *something* he’d thought factual of his roommate, and it leaves behind a small spark of dwindling confidence in George’s system.

An aching breath, inhaling crimson smoke, and George continues, “But, I didn’t know you- I didn’t know that you...”

He can’t do it. The words get stuck like burning honey behind his tongue. He feels *pathetic*.

Dream smiles, a bit. “What? That I like men, too?”

George just nods. It’s all he feels capable of.

If Dream can get any closer, he does. Takes another step forward- so close George can almost see his reflection in the polished, silver surface of Dream’s lip ring. If he were to inch forward, he’s sure the reflection would disappear with the presence of his own heavy breaths. It would smother its surface in fogged-up moisture. A little bit of him, on *Dream*.

“You like girls, right, Georgie?” Dream says with a hum, hands shoved in his pockets.

George feels ridiculous for hesitating. It’s hard to think straight, he rationalizes, when he can *feel* puffs of ash-laden breaths on his cheek.

He’s taking a little too long to respond, and he sees something flicker behind steely emerald irises.

“Yes.” George almost chokes on the syllable. For some reason, he feels *worse*, having gritted it out.

Amusement smothers Dream’s lips and quirks them into a smile. “So do I. I like them *a lot*,” he murmurs. A hand that George hadn’t seen escape the confines of his sweat pocket rises into his vision. And this time, he’s prepared for the feeling of *soft*, velvety fingertips on his jaw. They slide forward, halting at the apex of George’s chin.

“But, y’know...” Dream continues, then trails off. Their gazes level with each other.

And George doesn’t breathe. Because if he exhales, he knows something humiliating will rise up his throat alongside spent carbon dioxide.

The hand leaves its spot, and instead drifts towards a curl George didn’t know had fallen across his forehead. Gentle fingers coax the strand of dark hair behind his ear. They leave burn marks in George’s skin. He feels like he’s melting.

Dream pulls his hand back, but doesn’t move away. His next words float in wisps through the air, murmured light, airy, and *dreamlike*.

And they never leave George. They never will. They’ll fester in his mind and eat him *alive*.

Because Dream’s vermillion lips cradle hidden meanings, secrets, *nightmares*, when he leans in close, breath against George’s ear and a grit to his voice, and says,

“I also like pretty boys.”

Warmth and Poison

Chapter Summary

It's warm. Dream is warm. George's heart is cold.

Inexplicable sadness and loss and *disappointment*; it all drowns him. It nestles in his lungs and suffocates his airways. It infects his vision, his mouth, his veins.

The arm around his shoulder pulls him in, just slightly. A rattled exhale, and George is ready to split at the seams. So he does.

"What's wrong with me, Dream?"

Dream and George spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

Helllloo!!!!

Welcome back to Dud Cigarettes! This chapter is very long... haha. My outlines for these chapters always *seem* so concise, but then I start writing and I realize it's gonna be like 11k words lol.

A LOT of stuff happens this chapter. A few very poignant warnings before you begin:

*****Trigger warning for mild panic attacks, drinking, and smoking*****

Disclaimer: George's panic attack is modeled after my own experiences, and neither him nor Dream are experts on the matter in this. Please don't take this as a professional guide to deal with panic attacks.

This chapter also has some very sexual themes, but there is no explicit nsfw until later! Okay. Now that I got that out there... please enjoy :) I'm super excited to share this chapter with you! My twitter is linked in the endnotes. Follow me for updates and such!!

If Dream and/or George ever state they are no longer comfortable with shipping/nsfw, this fic will be immediately taken down.

George sees Dream differently, lately.

He's concluded that the irrational stirring of emotions in his chest everytime he so much as glances Dream's way are decidedly *not* negative. But they're definitely not positive, either. His inner turmoil lies in a gray zone; a limbo of sorts, lodged between helpless infatuation and persistent confusion.

There's newfound curiosity about the man George had already decided is a mystery. And that's shocking in itself, really. Because the fact that he has the capacity to gain even *more* interest in his roommate, is downright abhorrent.

It's *impossible*.

And yet, here George is, thinking about him. Sitting in his dorm, alone, with the A.C. unit obnoxiously whirring overhead. Playing with the webbed skin between his knuckles, imagining the phantom weight of metal catching on it, as if larger fingers are laced with his own.

He's still suffering from the aftershocks of his naïveté, ever since the night Dream had unveiled a *very significant* aspect of his life. The aspect of his life that includes men. Men who occasionally reside in his bed, his relationships, his *life*.

It had hit him harder than he'd like to admit.

A strong, nagging part of his brain has created a cesspool of self-deprecation; it's convinced him of his idiocy and ignorance, because *how could he have missed this? How did he not notice?*

Another portion is a cloudy haze, fuzzy and disorienting everytime his toes so much as *near* it. It fills his insides with a certain sort of dread; something so poignant and saturated it makes him feel ill. He feels it whenever Dream leaves at night, whenever he returns in the early a.m., whenever there's a latte occupying the edge of his nightstand.

This is the thing causing his sudden bout of insomnia- the restless nights he spends staring daggers across the room at the barren, cold divot of Dream's bed, or awaking with sweat-drenched sheets and shortness of breath.

Because visions of acrylic nails in Dream's skin have morphed into blunt ones instead. Because images of long, cascading hair tangled in a ring-adorned fist fades into something short, dark, and mussed. Breasts cupped in large hands turn into flat, masculine muscle.

Residual lipstick melts off scattered hickeys, stubble contrasts against freckled skin, wide hips begin to narrow.

George tries, and tries, and *tries*.

He thinks about his ex. He thinks about the girl who sat three rows down from him in chemistry. All soft curves, smooth skin, twinkling eyes, and mascara on lashes.

But he blinks, and all he sees is *red, red, red*.

Swelling calves, straining tendons, sharp jaws, and soft fingertips. Soft fingertips strumming along guitar cords. Soft fingertips against his chin. Against his lips. Against his-

George groans.

His forehead drops into his palm.

If he thought his imagination was abrasive before, it's infinitely worse now. His brain can't catch up with what his mind's eye paints- fast, sudden, and *primal*. Where it used to paint slender bodies of women in Dream's arms, it now assaults him with *pretty boys, pretty men, pretty, pretty, pretty*.

Because Dream likes pretty boys. He likes boyish waists and angular jaws. Stubbled skin and corded muscle. Flat chests and defined stomachs. Happy trails and...

Right.

George forces his mind to go blank, lest it paints *more* images for him. An involuntary flush looms on his cheekbones and creeps up his neck.

Associating Dream's nightly routine with men makes him feel vaguely nauseous, highlighted by the churning storm of anxiety in his stomach. At first, the violent reaction had freaked him out. He went through a full-blown internal crisis, because he's not homophobic, *he's not*, he's really, *really* not.

But the rolling tide of sickness in his gut still enforces the heavy burden of guilt weighing upon his shoulders.

He doesn't care what Dream does outside this room. He *shouldn't* care. He shouldn't think about who Dream chooses to pursue, about who he touches and kisses and beds.

But, *fuck*. He *does*.

He cares enough to give himself nightmares, to plague his waking days with blurry visages of girls- no, *men*- who keep Dream warm at night. He cares enough to carve Dream's initials into the blood-red lining of his heart, the backs of his lids, the ridges of his brain.

And it fucking *sucks*.

Because he doesn't want to see Dream any differently. He's the same. George is the same. Nothing should change, just because Dream likes men.

Nothing.

George exhales unevenly. His eyes flutter shut, and another groan crawls out of his chest. It's carnal- unadulterated and animalistic.

If nothing's changed, why can't he get over it?

He needs to clear his head.

And there aren't many places to do this, not when the ghost of Dream's presence follows his shadow wherever he goes. It incessantly whispers thoughts that are not his own into his ear. And the devil needs an angel to balance out its treachery- its *havoc*- on his soul, but there's no space for one.

Because both his shoulders are held by the devil's hands. Large, coiled, ring-laden hands with claws that sink into his skin and seep poison through his pores.

He feels like he's being infected. So he *runs*.

But the devil is steadfast- a powerful, inescapable entity capable of tearing George down time and time again.

Yet, he tries in vain to escape it in the quickness of his footsteps- hammering rubber soles against concrete stairs as he scales the building of his residential hall. Climbing ten stories leaves him gasping at the top, hands on his knees, knuckles white as fingers dig into his jeans.

There's sweat beaded on his forehead. Some trickles into his vision, dampening dark wisps of eyelashes until it falls, down, down, to the cement floor.

It makes George wish it were raining.

Because he's on the rooftop, cool wind kissing his ruddy cheeks and clear skies overhead. The clouds are light without the threat of storms, and, selfishly, *weakly*, George finds himself wishing the devil's claws would tighten, only slightly, just to see if it would make the heavens split open with cloudburst.

George sits against the brick structure shielding the stairwell from weather-wear, drawing his knees close to his chest. He lets himself breathe for a moment.

The air feels crisp in his lungs, heavy with autumn chill and soil-trodden leaves. There's one to his left; a leaf fluttering with the wind current and loosely being tugged along by Mother Earth's pull.

He thinks it might be red.

It's lost from George's sight once it tumbles off the edge of the building.

Cigarette butts litter the ground around him, likely leftovers from students who'd found this very spot semesters- maybe even *years*- before he did. He imagines a group of friends, chattering and swapping oxygen thick with smoke. Laughter and content voices whispering in the air. But he also imagines a lone soul, sitting in this very spot. A lit cigarette between an index and middle finger, sharing the air with nobody but themselves.

A single set of lungs. Inhaling, exhaling poison.

George's eyes catch on a cigarette by his heel. It's suspiciously whole. There's a singe at the very tip of it; rolled paper blackened but otherwise untouched. As if it'd been thrown away after the first hit- half of an inhale, at most.

He feels silly, thinking about how it came to be like that. How a cigarette, one that looks perfectly primed as a vessel for addictive nicotine, can still be deemed as *not good enough*.

Maybe there's something wrong with it he can't see.

Something off with the taste, the make, the concentration. Perhaps it was faulty.

A dud.

There's a foreign prick to his eyes, aching wetness building up at his waterline. His throat closes up. Why does he feel like he's going to cry?

He hates it. Hates feeling like this.

Like there's something wrong with him he can't see, like his life is directionless and unstable- nothing and *nobody* to keep him afloat or put together. He's got nothing going for him but a confusion-addled brain and shackles at his feet. They chain him to the devilish aura over his shoulder.

Unrelenting. Implacable.

George blinks rapidly, willing away the dam threatening to crack his already-delicate foundation. His head drops to his knees, and thin arms loop around jean-clad knees, pulling them impossibly closer to his chest.

He feels small.

Helpless.

He squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth.

“What the fuck is wrong with me?”

The murmur is unheard by anyone’s ears but his own. He wants to ask someone else. Because he doesn’t have the answers- no amount of asking himself will amount to any.

He doesn’t know how long he sits here.

It must be awhile, given the stiffness to his joints and the frozen tips of his fingers where the wind had caressed them for too long.

The sky has dimmed. It’s getting dark, nightfall looming on the horizon. Pale glimmers of stardust threaten to break through the light left in the day. The moon persists, sitting half-full next to a cluster of clouds.

But, all at once, George’s limbs shoot rimrod straight.

Because there are footsteps echoing up the stairwell to his right. They’re heavy, pounding up concrete steps with hasty clumsiness.

George goes to stand up, thighs tensing, ready to help him flee at a moment’s notice. But he doesn’t get the chance, before the door flies open, and a figure darts out, slamming it close with

impeccable haste and leaning against the dense metal with a relieved sigh. The man's jacket falls from broad shoulders- tossed to the side like a piece of leather trash. It hits the ground with a muffled *thump*.

And George doesn't dare move from his spot on the ground.

He just *stares*, wide-eyed with his heart in his throat.

It's Dream, because *of course it is*.

Umber eyes follow the movement of his head as it drops back against the door with a dull thud. His face is pinched together, an uncharacteristic frown smeared upon his lips as his chest heaves with rapid breaths.

George swallows down bile when he catches the faintest hints of leftover bruises on his neck.

His mind races.

Races with flashes of kiss-bitten lips attached to golden skin. The waiter's lips. Dream's lips. Both pairs sliding against each other, trailing down masculine bodies.

A man did that to Dream. Left visual marks upon his skin and lapped at flesh until capillaries burst beneath his touch.

A strained noise escapes George's nose before he can reign it back.

Dream's head snaps to attention, whipping to his left and staring down at where George sits- *cowers*. His breathing's evened out, but his eyes are still *wild*; frantic and anxious.

"George," he breathes out, eventually. He relaxes, just slightly. His voice is gritty- shredded enough to trace a shiver up George's spine.

Wetting his lips, Dream runs his hand through his hair, and shakily lowers to sit as well. George

eyes the movement. He has so many questions, but it's always a matter of execution, with him. He struggles to choke out syllables around Dream; struggles to *function* .

But he finds his voice- frail and meek, but still *his*. "Dream. What happened?"

It comes out quieter than he intends.

Sunset colors wash over their bodies, a glowing mix of oranges, pinks, and purples George cannot see. It's all red to him now, anyway. The air's gotten cooler, and there's gooseflesh on George's forearms.

Dream doesn't respond right away. He instead lifts his hips, and reaches with a hand into his back pocket, pulling out something rectangular and beaten around the edges.

A cigarette box.

All George can do is watch, jaw slack, as a lighter is fished out as well.

"You *smoke*?" he blurts. It sounds a bit rude- abrupt and accusing. So George's cheeks flush with ease, and the chilly wind suddenly doesn't feel as cold as it once did.

But, Dream surprises him, like always, and just chuckles, light and rough as sandpaper. When he pulls out a cigarette, it looks... *strange*. White-wrapped, uneven, and somewhat lumpy. *Amateur*. George's nose crinkles, catching an unpleasant smell.

"Cigs? No," Dream mutters, fitting one end in his mouth and lighting the other. The flame flickers, once, twice, flashing against the sharp planes of Dream's profile.

Hellfire glints off his facial piercings.

"But weed? Sometimes."

As soon as he takes his first inhale, George's senses are *flooded* by the overwhelming smell of

cannabis. Dream practically *melts* against the door at his back, eyes fluttering shut, joint dangling between ringed fingers. Smoke eventually pours like a faucet from his nose, twirling in wispy clouds, lingering in the air around them. He somehow makes it look graceful.

Pretty, even.

George coughs a few times. From the smoke, from his thoughts. His eyes burn. Heat sears the tips of his ears, when Dream's head lolls to look at him, amusement in his expression.

"Sorry." He doesn't sound sorry at all. "I haven't smoked in a long time. Just- needed it tonight. Didn't think you'd be up here."

And George could let it go.

He could sit here in silence, and fold in on himself; stumble around blindly like he always does. But he beats down the alarms in his brain, and pries open his lips.

"Why, though? Dream, what *happened*?" George pushes, albeit with a tremble to his inflection.

Dream pauses, halfway through his next hit, and doesn't let the smoke settle in his lungs before releasing it. There's an unreadable emotion in his eyes when they turn to settle on George.

Sadness, frustration, glimmery hope, perhaps.

"I- " Dream starts, then cuts himself off. His lips purse together, and his brows draw close, enough to furrow the skin between them. "I'm really shitty sometimes."

For once, George can sense Dream's hesitance. He can see the nerves, the bottled feelings, the slight quiver of his hands where they hold a materialized addiction. Ash sprinkles the ground between Dream's knees. It joins the fallen cigarette butts.

"I said something I didn't mean to say to my- my *date* tonight," he stutters out the word 'date' like it's despicable. Like it's gone rotten, festering in his mouth and decaying the enamel of his teeth. "It was... embarrassing. But also really, *really* shitty of me. I've been doing that a lot lately."

He takes another hit, allowing this one to make itself home in his lungs and bloodstream. It's a long time before the smoke reappears again.

"So I guess I kind of ran away," Dream finishes.

George stays silent, and observes.

But he also thinks.

Thinks about the irony of Dream's presence tasting like cigarette smoke, about the cigarette ash on the ground, about the abandoned one idle next to his shoe. He wonders if Dream would see the unused one as untapped addictive potential, or if he'd believe that there was something amiss with it; a definitive *reason* why it's sitting there, unusable and at home on the ground.

"Do you know why you keep messing things up?" George eventually murmurs back. It's quiet.

The world matches his words' energy- completely still other than the cicadas humming in nearby trees.

Dream looks inquisitively at George, gaze flitting over his features, as if analyzing him. George flushes a little, and squirms under his scrutiny. The movement doesn't go unnoticed, given the increased sharpness in his eyes. Eventually, though, Dream relieves him, and looks away.

A sad smile pulls at the corners of his lips. It's reserved, yet closed-off. George can't read him.

Click, click, click.

The rattling sound of metal on teeth, subtle and rapid, echoes inside George's head. Dream goes to speak again.

"Yeah, I do," he mutters. A brazen thumb taps the end of the joint, a fresh cluster of ash being swept away by the wind. There's a far-off look to his eyes when he brings it to his lips once more.

Breathes in, breathes out. Lit embers flare up; a bright glow against the cool sky. “But I don’t think I can stop,” Dream says, no louder than a whisper.

Any words that may have been convinced to fall from George’s lips dry up and coat sand on his tongue. He doesn’t know what to say.

So, he stays silent, and so does Dream, for a while. It’s not awkward, nor is it uncomfortable, which George feels slightly perturbed by. Because, really, this *should* be awkward, in theory.

The devil manifested on the ground next to him, a disintegrating addiction dangling between claws soaked with George’s blood. Unsaid words suspended in the air between their bodies; neither man making a move to grab for them, let alone make sense of them.

It’s quiet, so, *so* quiet.

But it’s peaceful. Soothing, almost.

The wind picks up, tousling hair and nipping at skin. George feels a violent shiver wrack the expanse of his body, while Dream just sits, perfectly content in a tee shirt.

But then, there’s fabric in his peripheral. Dream holds it out, hanging from a single finger while he takes a particularly long hit.

Dream’s jacket.

And George just *stares*, like a deer caught in headlights, eyes wide as sweltering stars. He recognizes the offer with ease, and yet, he hesitates. Because how many times has Dream done this? How many times have women and men alike been caressed by the insides of this very jacket, gooseflesh-riddled skin blanketed by *Dream, Dream, Dream*.

But the jacket is just thrust further into his face.

“Just take the damn coat, princess. I promise it doesn’t have gay cooties, or whatever you’re worried about,” Dream muses, swaying the material in a way that’s meant to be enticing.

And just like that, George's internal fear kicks into overdrive. Words pour like a faucet, the dam crumbling faster than he's prepared for. "*No*, Dream, I don't think- I mean, I don't care that you- that you..." His throat closes up again. He's panicking, heart thundering in his ears, cold sweat slicking his palms.

Dream raises an eyebrow. "You can't even *say* it, George. You've been staring at me like I'm a fucking ghost since you found out I'm bi."

"I know," George affirms. He takes a rattling breath. "*I know*. But I swear I don't care, Dream. I really, *really* don't. I think I'm just confused, about a lot of things, right now. But I'm not- I'm not-"

But Dream cuts him off with a dismissive wave. It seems final, like etching George's name on a tombstone. "George, I know you're not homophobic. It's alright, calm down." Instead of waiting for a response, Dream catches the joint between his teeth and uses both hands to drape the jacket over George's shoulders. Something vaguely anxious flutters in his chest when soft fingers brush the bare skin of his arm.

It's warm.

George's mouth snaps shut, glued close in a taut line. He wished for it to rain, but now, he's strangely sated. Because his senses flood with storm-drenched pavement and damp soil. Misty wind and swirling clouds.

Dream leans back again, and holds the joint out, in his direction. *An offer*.

The way he does it, so *prettily*, almost makes George want to indulge. He lets his gaze linger on the end where Dream's lips had occupied just seconds prior, and imagines his own wrapping about the same space. Imagines the dampness of the paper where Dream's tongue had nicked it. Imagines tracing his own along the edges, tasting cannabis and risk.

Inhaling, exhaling poison. A swap, from one mouth to another.

It's a dangerous, *dangerous* thought. *He can't*.

So he waves him off with an, “I’m good,” and compensates the loss by tugging Dream’s jacket tighter around himself.

There’s a multitude of questions George could launch off his tongue. But he chokes them down, instead, and wallows in the reigning silence. It’s barely another five minutes before Dream sighs, hauling himself to his feet. He drops the disintegrating remains of the joint and smothers it beneath the pressure of his boot-clad toe, crushing ash into fine dust.

For a moment, he just looks down at George. And George returns the gaze with a tentativeness he’s gotten far too acquainted with nowadays. But, green eyes eventually leave the expanse of his face, and flicker lower.

Then, he’s crouching.

George wants to curse at himself, when he unintentionally flinches, curling further into himself. The grip he has on Dream’s jacket increases tenfold, and he’s sure there’ll be zipper-sized indents carved into his palms when it loosens.

Dream just sends him an unreadable look, then reaches out a hand.

It pauses by his heel. Fingers tap at his ankle, and George blinks a few times at the contact. He shuffles them away, as if feebly trying to escape the persistent claws of his devil incarnate.

But Dream ignores this in favor of gently grasping something between two knuckles. His fingertips avoid grazing it’s surface, as if it’ll corrupt the downy softness of skin there.

It’s the cigarette.

Whole, hardly scuffed, and blackened just *faintly* at one end. He rolls it a few times along the webbed skin and rings between his fingers, as if feeling the innards through layers of paper and flesh.

George holds his breath.

Then, Dream smiles, looks up at George through honeyed lashes, and says, “What a waste.”

The words simmer beneath George’s skin. They creep through his veins and kickstart a frenzy of hummingbird wings against the hollows of his chest. It feels as if a stone in his stomach lifts, a feeling of intense relief washing over him.

Dream thinks it’s wasted potential.

Warmth teases the top slats of his ribs when Dream sets- *not drops*- the cigarette on the ground once more. George doesn’t dare *breathe* when Dream’s hand comes to rest on the apex of his knee. The metal feels cold through the material of his jeans. His thumb rubs a single, terse circle against the outside of his thigh.

But George is so focused on trying to ebb the frantic beating of his heart to notice Dream standing up once more.

A snide smirk, a pat-down of his clothes, and Dream holds out a hand. It’s another offer. George goes to take it this time, but falters a bit, when Dream opens his mouth to speak.

His next words shock his heart back into regularity.

“Let’s go to a party, Georgie.”

George doesn’t know how he got here.

Standing before a mirror in a baby blue crew neck and ripped jeans, fretful hands pushing and tucking out-of-place strands of hair until he feels crazy.

He hasn’t been to a party since late last year. And while George would be more inclined to stay in bed all day, he can recognize the unhealthiness of it. He can recognize his incessant self-destructive

thoughts and the dangerous roads he traverses while locked indoors.

So he couldn't say no to Dream. But when has he ever, realistically.

"You look fine. Stop messing with it."

The jasmine-drenched voice behind him is startling. He didn't even hear the release of the bathroom lock.

George goes to sputter out a response, but it dies altogether when he turns around.

Because Dream is standing there, in a *skirt*.

It's black, pleated and short, revealing sun-adversed thighs and held at his waist by a bulky belt. A waist that belongs to Dream. A *skirt* that belongs to Dream. Dream. In a skirt.

George is staring.

His lips part, hands suspended in the air, as if to reach out and confirm if it's real or not. He snatches them back against his body, and fiddles with the hem of his crew.

Dream is smirking.

And George *despises* it. Because his cheeks are hot, and he's still processing the fishnets, the boots, the cropped hoodie. The way Dream's eyeliner seems heavier with smoky eyeliner and his lips are coated in a thin sheen of chapstick. George reprimands himself with a firm bite to the cheek when he wonders what flavor it is.

"You alright, princess?" There's no concern to his tone. Instead, it's overbrimming with cocky mirth, decorative fingers trailing along the flare of his skirt. The movement draws George's gaze even more.

And truthfully, *no*, he's not okay. How can he be, when the man George can't get off his mind is standing so confident and self-assured in feminine wear; feminine wear George thinks he looks

good in, no less.

Blinking once, twice, just to wipe his mind blank, George mutters, “‘M fine,” and looks away.

“You sure?” Dream prompts. The metallic jangling of his lanyard cuts through the air as he slings it around his neck.

No. Of course I'm not.

“Yeah,” George says with a huff. “I just... don't know a lot of guys who wear skirts. Surprised me, is all.”

That's definitely *not* all, but like hell George is going to voice that aloud. He's not going to voice how *small* Dream's waist looks, how perfectly onyx makeup accentuates the sloping angles of his eyes, how his freckle-adorned thighs look so *smooth* under the delicate crisscross of fishnets, and *oh god*, did he shave them?

Yeah, George shoves those words *far* out of reach of his lips and tongue.

A contemplative hum from Dream filters through George's ears, accompanied by several ‘*click, click, click*’ s. There's the acute noise of the door's lock releasing and the loud protest of old hinges against rust. When George looks up again, Dream has his arms crossed, leaning against the door to keep it open.

Hooded eyes look George up and down. He has the awareness to feel somewhat scandalized under the intensity, face warming and heartbeat kicking up once more.

But, as soon as they came, emerald green quickly abandons it's observation. Another smirk. “From what I've learned Georgie, it's that a *lot* of guys look good in skirts,” Dream states, turning to leave.

It feels like a lie, to George.

Because there's something about his own stature, his *build*, that tells him he'd look *awful* in a skirt.

Skirts are crafted for delicate waists and flaring hips, for curvaceous women and shapely swells of fat and muscle. For *girls*, for pretty women with soft thighs, for planes of tight stomachs and wiry limbs, for attractive people with long, *long* legs and hip dimples and facial piercings and-

Fuck. Dream looks really, *really* good in a skirt.

George wets his lips and takes a few steps towards the door as well. It feels like he's signing his fate, stepping through the threshold and out into the unforgiving hallway- a stark contrast to the unhealthy comfort within their dorm room.

"Seriously, though," Dream looks back for a moment. "You never know until you try one on yourself."

There's more to that statement, more *implications*, but George just purses his lips together and says nothing. *Thinks* of nothing. It's for the best.

And maybe George stares a little *too* intensely at the way the fabric bounces and sways with Dream's steps- how the swishing of ebony against milky skin contrasts even in the darkness of night.

The walk is mostly painless- just a fifteen minute trek through campus, towards the townhouses to the eastside.

Dream had explained he was invited by a friend of a friend, and that he thought the time out would be good for both of them. Of course, George was, and still *is*, bewildered, because *why* would Dream want to take *him* with? And, to be fair, he was never rewarded a straightforward answer.

It was dodged with, "I dunno. Circumstance, I guess," or "They said I could bring someone," or "Are you coming or not, princess?".

So, here they are.

Standing in the entryway of a grandiose college townhouse, with Greek-style pillars to their sides and tall ceilings overhead. Clusters, *blurs*, of people and excitable voices make his comprehension fly out the window. Cool-toned lights flicker on ivory walls, painting each room in a carefree aura. Beer bottles, cans, and confetti pepper the floor- hardly noticeable under the swamping darkness of

swaying bodies and overwhelming music.

He feels each beat of the bass-heavy instruments thunder through his chest. It rattles his insides around, and further shatters his devil-acquainted soul.

Nostalgia washes over him, just for a moment.

A party, akin to one like this. Long hair in his vision, bubblegum lips and a drunken smile, hands on hips and false love on tongues. Sweat-slicked necks and bumping of limbs. There are soft fingers threaded through his own. A smaller body in his arms. Flowery perfume and two hearts sidled against each other- one free and one cursed. One leading and one following.

One hers, one his.

He needs a drink.

George vaguely senses the presence of Dream behind him as he scurries towards the kitchen, but he's so focused on keeping his dinner down that he hardly notices. It's quieter in here, but it does little to soothe the frantic panic in his mind. His hands are practically *trembling* when he goes for a vodka and soda, fumbling with the flap at the crest of the can.

It's slick with condensation, his hands with cold sweat. It culminates in a recipe for disaster- fingers unable to find purchase on the slippery aluminum, heart pounding in his throat.

But then, it's taken from his grasp, given back after a momentary sound of metal clanking and the released hiss of carbonation. George shrewdly takes it from Dream's grip. The nerves at the joints of his knuckles flare up when his fingers drag along the back of his hand in the exchange.

He downs half the can in one go, throat burning with intense fizz and a pleasant burn chasing behind it. When he wipes his lips clean with a sleeve, he notices Dream just *standing there- staring*.

"What?" George is almost proud of how well he manages to school his inflection.

Dream looks perplexed. “Are you alright? You went, like, all freakazoid on me for a sec.”

Taking another sip, George scrunches his nose. “It’s been a long week.” And Dream probably doesn’t buy it, but he shrugs all the same, and digs through the cooler for a few moments.

It’s rather surprising, when he pulls out a *sprite*, of all things.

“You’re not drinking? We didn’t drive, or anything,” George questions. He raptly watches a drop of water trail down the bulk of his hand, wetting skin and landing on his skirt.

Dream laughs, fucking *laughs*, like it’s the funniest thing George has said to him. And George involuntarily goes blank, because *wow*, he’s never heard Dream laugh like this.

It’s sweet and airy- wheezy and boisterous. Addictive, contagious, and blooming with something warm like sunlight. It brings out subtle dimples in his cheeks, and the twinkle in his eye with each bout of laughter. George is stunned into silence, and he feels a slight flush rise to his face.

He blames it on the alcohol.

Dream eventually comes down and brings his hand to his mouth, covering his lips as the chuckles die out.

“George,” Dream starts, eyes scrunched in amusement, “I don’t drink.”

To say George is shocked is a *vast* understatement. The idea of this man, with metal embedded into cartilage and a pack of joints under his belt, *not* drinking just seems unfathomable.

George covers his blatant shock with another long sip of his drink. He speaks without really thinking. “You look like you would, though.”

And Dream just cocks an eyebrow. Swirls the can in between his fingertips, swishing the liquid contents and listening to bubbles *pop* against the aluminum walls.

“You know, just because I *look* like I would, doesn’t mean I do. Just like how you didn’t think I

fuck men,” George almost chokes on his drink, “but I do.”

“That’s different,” George tries. He’s embarrassed.

“Is it?”

“I don’t- I don’t know,” he blurts back, anxiously combing a hand through his hair. It ruins any perfecting he’d done back at the dorm. “I didn’t mean it like that. Sorry.”

Dream shakes his head, still smiling from his laughing fit. “It’s fine,” he assures. “Not to mention, I’m like, still kind of high right now. Alcohol would just be overkill.”

Any sort of rebuttal dies altogether on George’s tongue. He’s about to say something, *anything*, but before he can, there’s one, no, *two* people approaching them. A tall man and stout girl.

Dream’s head swivels to face where George’s gaze fixates on their figures.

A brief flash of puzzlement and odd recognition distorts the blond’s face, scrunching up in meagre distaste, as if he’d eaten something rotten. The can between his fingers dents under increased pressure.

George has little time to mull these details over before the girl starts talking to Dream. But all her words come out blurry to George, like they’ve been smeared and ground up beyond repair. He doesn’t retain *any* of it. Because he’s busy watching Dream bite his lip and offer her an unenthusiastic greeting. The man with her hangs back a bit.

They know each other.

The girl is grabbing at Dream’s sleeve. She’s wildly gesturing towards the entry room; the *dance floor*. He looks hesitant, but ultimately willing.

Dream shoots him a glance, and George hopes he doesn’t look too pathetic; too *pleading*. He doesn’t want to be left alone. Not in the state he’s in. But Dream is already pointing to where the girl is trying to drag him away. Gesturing vaguely, hoping George can understand. Carmine words

drip from his lips, but they fall upon deaf ears.

George blocks them out.

Then, he's gone. And George is standing in the kitchen, alone. At a college party.

He needs more drinks.

George doesn't process the time.

Between Dream leaving to hang out with his 'friends' to George's inevitable isolation on a couch in a desolate corner, it's all a blur. But the burning heat of several tequila shots swathing his system in an unpleasant buzz surely isn't.

He catches fleeting sights of blond hair in the crowd. Of a black skirt being grabbed at. Of glinting metal.

It *hurts*.

It fucking *hurts*, because George is at a party because of *Dream*, and yet he's all alone on a fucking couch, drunk off his mind and tormented by the carefree man mingling somewhere in a sea of lost faces.

He's alone. Like always.

There's no push or pull to where he's supposed to go, now. At least the leaf he saw on the roof just hours earlier had a wind current to rely on; the natural direction of nature and the inevitable decay into something rebirthed and beautiful.

But George's wind is stagnant. It's *stale*. He's not moving forward, nor is he moving backwards.

Limbo.

He tucks his legs closer to his chest, if it's even possible. His brain feels like cotton, his ears are ringing, the ceiling is spinning. The alcohol does little to distract him.

There's the occasional bypasser who sends one or two flirtatious comments towards him, but he waves each off within seconds. Because every girl's face morphs into *hers*, and every painted nail or heeled foot makes him ill.

He's stewing in the aftershocks of his third shot when someone's weight slumps into the cushions next to him.

And isn't it horrible, absolutely *terrible*, that he knows it's Dream?

George shoves his face into the shadows of his knees.

The music in his ears is muffled and drowning in incomprehensible lyrics. It's nothing like Dream's. Nothing like rainfall and tea, like secondhand smoke and tangible addiction.

"George, hey," he says. Like George's heart isn't cracking at the seams and splintering around the carved initials of Dream's name.

And his inhibitions are gone. There's nothing to hold in the pathetic, drunken whine that slips from his lips when a hand shakes his shoulder.

"George, look at me, please?"

And he does, but not without acidic regret scorching the back of his throat. He turns his head, rests his cheek on one knee. Dream is looking at him with such brutal, *honest*, concern. It's almost scary. George notices immediately that he's sweaty, lips raw and hoodie hanging off one shoulder. Hair askew and eyeliner smudged.

But his eyes. His eyes are all him. All *George*. Focused on him, reflecting his tired, tired face-filled with worry for *him*.

It makes George want to kick and scream and tear at his skin. But he just lets word vomit craft it's path from tongue to ears, instead.

"Why'd you leave me alone?" George says. Sadness permeates somewhere in his chest. "That was a *dick* move, Dream. You can't just take someone to a party and- and fucking *leave* them." He knows he probably sounds a bit ridiculous. But there's vodka in his veins and bottled emotion painted behind his lids. He can't bring himself to care.

Dream blinks a few times. Heavy guilt draws a thick frown upon his lips.

"I know," he starts. The hand on George's shoulder moves to his back. "They weren't gonna leave me alone until I hung out with them for a bit. 'M sorry, Georgie. Guess I thought you might've found someone here who you recognized, since I couldn't find you for a while."

The overwhelming frustration and confusion; it both creates a cocktail of mounting, slurred syllables. "I was in the kitchen getting *drunk*, Dream," George nearly spits.

If Dream's taken aback by this, he doesn't show it. "Ah," he responds. "I'm sorry." It's genuine. His brows are drawn together, as if he's in pain.

George hates that he wants to reach and smooth them out.

"I won't leave you again tonight, okay?"

George does little more than huff in reply. He doesn't even have the energy to scoot away when Dream drapes an arm along the back of the couch and leans in close. If George is drunk, he feels even more so when the aroma of thunderstorms and cannabis cloud his rationality. It's a deadly concoction; the devil's essence mingling with the pertiance of alcohol.

They're silent for a bit. Simply observing the swell and sway of people in the darkened crowd; bodies seeking bodies, hands seeking waists, mouths seeking necks.

Dream's eyes are trained on a woman by the adjacent wall. George only knows this because he's staring at his face.

"What do you think about her?" Dream's question shocks George out of it a bit, and he forces his gaze towards the girl he's addressing.

Even through the glazed smog of intoxication, he can recognize conventional attractiveness when he sees it. She's relatively tall; bottle-like figure and long legs, silky hair tied in a knot and eyelashes thick enough to challenge false ones.

But there are alarms in his ears. A needle piercing his chest and bile climbing his throat. Because he can recognize her attractiveness, maybe even appreciate it to some extent. Yet, he's desireless. Barren of *want*, of pooling lust or a sense of allure.

There's *nothing*.

So his eyes are searching. They're scanning the room, seeking attraction and physical connection. Nothing. *Absolutely nothing*.

That is, until they make their way back to Dream.

Because then, there's a sudden churning emotion behind his eyes, a rising flush to his cheeks, and a stirring in his core. His mouth goes dry. From the alcohol- from *circumstance*.

"George?" Dream prompts. Hot puffs of breath land and disperse on the side of George's face.

When did he get so close?

Arm practically around his shoulders, thigh brushing his own, silver studs so near he can see his reflection. George gapes a bit.

Dream's eyes flicker down to the movement of his parted lips, and they linger. George thinks he's

going crazy. He *has* to be. So his gaze returns to the girl, if only to put slight distance between himself and temptation.

He's trying again. He's *straining* with the effort to dig through himself- to uncover the love and arousal and affection he'd once held for beautiful girls like these. For his ex, for the ones he'd meet at bars, for the intelligent ones, the confident ones, the *stable* ones.

Nothing. Fucking *nothing*.

A burning ache closes his throat. His eyes flutter shut, and the room spins faster.

George's body gives up, slumping into Dream's side and lacking any care he can't bother to muster.

It's warm. Dream is warm. George's heart is cold.

Inexplicable sadness and loss and regret and *disappointment*; it all drowns him. It nestles in his lungs and suffocates his airways. It infects his vision, his mouth, his veins.

The arm around his shoulder pulls him in, just slightly. A rattled exhale, and George is ready to split at the seams. So he does.

"What's wrong with me, Dream."

It's a statement, not a question. Murmured lowly, hardly audible if not for the proximity between them.

He feels a frown disgrace Dream's lips from where they're pressed to the crown of his head. But there's no response.

George is tired. He's so, *so* tired. His heart is spent, as is his pride.

Nothing feels worse than this, he decides.

He grits his teeth, and presses his nose into the potent tempest and smoke he finds. The breathing, living embodiment of his confusion, his venomous addiction, his *hell*. His heaven.

Fuck. He's drunk.

George has had enough.

"Let's go home, please."

The walk back is painful.

Trees sway, sidewalks blur, feet stumble.

But there are hands there to catch each misstep, a honeyed voice to encourage and soothe, a warm body to lean on. George blinks, and they're home.

His surroundings are fuzzy, and there's a buzz in his veins where liquidized toxins settle. Large palms are sitting him down on his bed. Then they're on his sneakers, untying double knots and sliding socks off his feet.

Dream's speaking. He's saying things; hushed and saccharine. Vague things, soft things- things that tattoo themselves under George's skin. He feels vaguely empty, watching Dream take care of him like this.

Hollowed. Desolate. Unseeing, unhearing.

Dream's rings *clink* against the buckle of George's belt as he goes to unlatch it. The pressure and warmth of his touch in such an area makes his heart rate skyrocket. His hands scramble at Dream's

wrists, shakily trying to pry them off. He's breathing *fast*.

Panicking. Why is he panicking?

"Georgie," Dream whispers, hands turning over to hold George's own, rubbing gentle circles into milky skin to calm him down. "I'm trying to help you. Just gonna take off your jeans, alright? That's all."

George feels incapable of speech. All his saliva's dried up, leaving behind ash and dust. So he just nods, entire body trembling.

This time, Dream successfully tugs his belt from its constraining loops, hooking fingers into the stitched waistline to pull both legs from restrictive clothing. Each and every graze of heavy rings, corded knuckles, and soft fingertips leave George a *mess*.

His limbs are twitching, muscles quivering and heart beating out his throat. He's suffocating. *He can't breathe*.

His fingers coil into the bedding beneath his fingers when Dream looks up at him from his knees. Warmth pools in George's abdomen. Heady, foreign, and fucking *terrifying*.

He hates it.

And now he's confused.

Because Dream is getting to his feet, both hands suddenly on his shoulders. George's hearing is stuffed with sopping cotton; the world is muffled and ringing. Dream is saying something *loudly*, eyes wild and frantic.

Why is he so worried?

But it's then that George realizes his cheeks are wet. And his vision is darkening around the edges. Lightheaded. Everything aches. His lungs feel vacant- heart trying to escape the confines of his chest.

He's gasping, but air leaves as quick as it came.

Dream's palms are on his cheeks. He's saying something, pupils dilated and *frightened*.

"...the... calm d... rge... Br...the!"

Breathe. Dream's telling him to breathe.

So he tries, hiccuping and sputtering and gasping through each inhale and exhale. They breathe together, him and Dream. Schooling lungs and allowing oxygen to flood his system. The black border around his vision slowly recedes, until all he can see is *red* and *Dream, Dream, Dream*.

"...there. You're ... okay. It's okay."

George's hearing comes back- slowly. It's blurred and too-quiet. But it's there. The sound of Dream's voice is like coming home.

"Look at me. You're alright," he says. George wants to believe him. "Describe to me where you are, George."

His breathing is still labored, unsteady and hoarse, but he manages. For Dream. "D-Dorm... My side."

Dream nods. "Good. What color?"

George's eyes are obscured by fat tears and clumped lashes, but he looks around anyway. "Dark... it's- it's dark. L-Like blue..." He hiccups again.

Another wave of materialized sorrow threatens his waterline. It breaks through with ease, and more tears fall. His throat closes up, eyes stinging.

He can't stop crying.

“George...” Dream looks so... *sad*. There’s pity in his gaze, gentleness in his touch.

And George can’t *stand it*.

So he breaks. Splits apart and shatters like porcelain on tile, falling forward into Dream’s chest and clinging to the fabric of his hoodie like a lifeline. He’s full-on *sobbing* now, but at least his lungs are working. The cloth beneath his face is soaked in seconds.

Each sob *wracks* through his spine and delivers jolts to each of his limbs. Pain makes itself known in battered cries, slipping like a faucet from sore lips.

The returned embrace of Dream’s arms makes the nerves of his skin crawl and sing at the same time.

A few minutes pass, and they’re lying down on the bed. George doesn’t remember when his world turned horizontal. Ruddy face buried in Dream’s chest, arms looped around a body that burns and *kills* him, ever-so-slowly. Dream’s hand cups his neck and brings him close.

He’s murmuring encouragement and shushing his cries.

But George is speaking, too.

Words of spite and hatred; both towards himself and the devil wound about his limbs. They’re incoherent and drunk on lingering intoxication.

“Hate you, *hate you...*” George sobs.

He’s not sure if he means it, or not.

And Dream just lets him- no complaints or sudden movements. Just sweet lips and palms, everywhere at once. It’s like he’s been prepared.

Like he's been *expecting* this.

Expecting George to split into shards of glass before him, to crumble like a decrepit building and sink to his knees. But it doesn't matter, right now.

George is tired. So he doesn't think, doesn't dream.

He falls asleep, broken.

His head hurts.

That's the first thing he notices.

The second thing is that he feels *horrible*. His lids are swollen, eyebags heavier than usual; there's a distinct soreness to his chest that wasn't there yesterday. His limbs are aching and weak, joints struggling to shift beneath the comforter.

Crusted, puffy eyes manage to crack open. The room is fairly dark- curtains drawn and lights off. He appreciates it.

Cotton lodged in the nooks of his brain begins to melt. Awareness returns in small bursts, blinking to clear muddy vision.

It's then that he realizes. The dorm isn't silent.

There's a soft melody wafting through the air. Velvety hums and slow, dancing notes.

George tastes Dream's music before he sees it.

Because Dream's not in his bed. The strumming of guitar strings takes a second to register, but when it does, he realizes it's coming from *behind him*.

Ignoring the hammering nausea in his skull, he shifts, lying flat on his back to look over his shoulder. He's a bit shocked to find Dream on *his* bed. Leaning against the wall, legs draped over George's own. His feet are dangling just off the edge, acoustic guitar in his hands. Blond lashes obscure green eyes, kissing his freckled cheeks as confident hands finger across each chord- fluent and pretty.

He must've changed into more comfortable attire at some point, last night. There are gaps and holes in George's memory, as if a sheer screen has been laid overtop of it.

But he does recall falling asleep warm. He remembers why, but pretends he doesn't. Because thinking about it will make things worse.

So George just stares, for a while. Infatuated.

Dream's music is calming. Like waves lapping lazily at the pebbled shore of the sea. Like the drip of dew on morning leaves. Like a dispersed cloud of smoke in the night sky.

It ebbs the frantic pounding of his head, if just for a moment.

But then, Dream stops. It's when recognition graces his expression. The silence is abrupt; the last note cut off prematurely. Dream's eyes are still shut.

The room feels strangely tense, when mute stillness reigns overhead once more. George observes Dream's brows furrow, as if perplexed. Then, his eyes are open, half-lidded and trained on the wall across from them.

And now, he's speaking. George wishes he wasn't.

"Do you like guys, George?"

Pierced lips caress dreaded syllables. *Overwhelming* syllables. George feels the world disappear beneath him, when the low timbre of Dream's voice reaches the grasp of his ears.

He sits up, *fast*. The world spins, but George tries to ignore it- bites down the after effects of booze and disorientation. The sand on his tongue is swallowed with difficulty, blinking the threads of dreary sleep from his vision.

Panic attacks are something he doesn't often deal with. But the one from last night still has its hands around his neck; it's leaving rings of bruises about the column of his throat, reminding him, reminding *everyone*, of his fate.

The chokehold grows firmer.

Indignation and trepidation- *raw panic*- seize his body and make him their toy- stringing him along like a puppet when his mouth opens, and words tumble out.

"No. No, no, no, Dream. *Fuck*," he curses, head dropping to his palm. Fingers ground into his scalp, digging trenches into brunette hair and nails tearing at skin. He feels fucking *sick*, again. But not from the hangover. "I'm- I'm *straight*, Dream. I had- I had a girlfriend. For *years*. *Fuck*, what the fuck."

Even George doesn't believe the words. They're not his own.

When he manages to fight the stinging curse of bile down, he looks up once more.

Dream's head is tilted against the wall. He's staring at him. His eyes are swimming with *something*; something George can't pin down. He seems sad again- the frown etched into his lips deepening.

Not disappointment. Just... painful recognition.

Then, he sighs, long and exasperated. He goes boneless against the wall, features pinching together. "Sorry. It's just... you remind me of myself, in a fucked-up kind of way," he breathes. Before George can ask *what the hell he means by that*, Dream is standing up. The bed shifts with his weight when he goes to tuck his guitar away with an acidic lock and key.

There's loss in the air.

"By the way- " Dream starts, halting his movements; reaching back to- *oh*.

To pull his shirt up and over his head.

George should probably look away (why should he look away?), when Dream leans down and digs through the dresser for a clean change of clothes.

But he doesn't.

"-there's some Advil in your desk drawer. I put a bottle of water on your nightstand, too," he continues, faced away from George. "You'll probably need it."

Next go his sweats, kicked off and hooked around a finger to toss into the laundry basket. Dream's always been good about that sort of thing. Cleaning up, taking care of the room, respecting space.

But then George goes *blank*. T.V. static; radio silence.

Because Dream's boxers join his sweats. Slip down coiled thighs, knees, and calves. Pool at his feet. He steps out of them, bare.

Recognizable warmth seeps into the pit of his stomach.

Molten gold. A metallic tang on his tongue.

It's the same sensation he'd felt last night; the same one that'd sent him careening off the edge into delirious panic. It's bitterly familiar- *ridiculous*. Because George's face is on *fire*, and there's a bubbling heat in his chest.

He's grown up around vulgar roommates, around brothers and close-knit friends. Changing in front

of other guys is a common, recurring thing in his life.

But he's blushing. He knows he is.

And the longer he *stares*; stares at smooth, pale skin and swelling curves, at normally-hidden freckles and hip dimples, the worse it gets. Because *he's blushing*. Over Dream. Over a man changing in front of him.

Why the fuck is he blushing?

And the thing is that it never goes away, afterwards.

The swirling, pleasurable, *scary* heat in his core. The less-than-innocent images he dreams of at night. The *staring*.

It's new, it's *daunting*. His fixation is especially worse now, because he's been seeing more of Dream recently.

Strangely, he's stopped his nightly excursions- his frequent conquests of other people's bodies. He stays indoors, and sleeps when George does. His neck stays uniform in color, uninterrupted by the occasional lipstick stain or violet mark.

It's pristine, for once.

And George wonders why. Of course he does.

But there's more that George notices.

It's that Dream has also started smoking. *A lot.*

There are times the smell of weed is so saturated it burns George's eyes. Claws at his sinuses and stings his nose.

But, somehow, it feels right. *Normal.* Like his lungs are *meant* to be filled with poison and oxygen-deprived air. Filled with something *Dream.*

But what feels decidedly *not* right, are the thoughts he's having.

George is accustomed to confusion. He's accustomed to his less-than-ideal fixation on Dream. What he's *not* accustomed to, however, is the sudden influx of nights he wakes up drenched in sweat, a problem straining below the sheets and heat in his veins.

It's embarrassing- frustrating and jarring. Having to creep to their shared bathroom for cold three a.m. showers and a change of clothes. It's becoming more frequent than it should be.

It makes him feel like a fucking *teenager.*

But what's worse is the *context.* The thoughts that *put* him in these humiliating situations. The nightly escapades into ignorant bliss, haunted by his inner desires that remain unknown, despite how desperately George tries to reach inside himself.

There's a distinct lack of feminine attributes in his dreams. And, in the same way, there are no masculine ones, either. Instead, it's something in-between.

Something distinctly separate- *unique.*

It's fleeting paintings of thin waists; hands tugging at them. It's images of large palms, then small ones; both sets tracing along planes of iridescent shades of skin and bellies. It's legs, some long and sturdy and others reminiscent of his own, both tangled together.

Skin on skin. Lust on lust. A pierced tongue on his panic-ridden throat. Rings between knuckles. Dimples at hips.

He wakes up hard, again and again and *again*.

Not because of a woman, not because of a man.

It's because of him and Dream.

Both of them. His visions are filled with their bodies- his and Dream's- touching and grabbing and twining together, melding into something unified, something scarily enticing.

He's going crazy again.

Rationality is lost when he starts bargaining with himself.

He's attracted to Dream. It's frightening, but true. There's little he can do about that. But George tells himself it's because Dream's a feminine guy. He has a narrow waist. He wears makeup and piercings and skirts and has longer hair. Pretty, spindly, and delicate in some places.

Femininity. George is attracted to femininity.

That's all. He's attracted to femininity, and Dream just so happens to be the most non-conforming man he knows. They live in close proximity. George is lonely.

It's circumstance.

But, today, as if to taunt him, Dream is the most masculine he's seen him yet. His piercings and rings sit in a cluster on the nightstand, eyes barren of artificial enhancement. He hasn't shaved today. Flecks of stubble bloom along his jaw, his chin.

Casual attire- boyish and comfortable. Far from feminine.

They're sitting on respective beds, in their own worlds. Except George is trying to steal a little of

Dream's. By glancing, by thinking, by reaching out.

And he feels no earth-shattering shift inside him at this change, like he thought he might. He's the same. He *feels* the same. And really, he shouldn't push it. He should give up now, and forget about the shift in Dream's appearance.

Thunder rattles the inside of his skull as he tries to leave it at just that.

Dream looks like a man today.

George is not supposed to be drawn to his face, his lashes, his five o'clock shadow.

But he always looks like a man.

Right.

It's a thought he's been avoiding; foolishly setting it to the side as if he forgot he put it there in the first place. Because Dream is still a man. He identifies as one. He *is* one. No matter what he's wearing. No matter the makeup, the skirts, the jewelry.

George's hands tremble where he picks at the creased edge of his notebook. He tries to convince himself that there's still a chance at some sort of fluke.

That there's a chance he's *not* attracted to Dream at all. That he's just waiting for the right girl to stumble into his life, like before, and he's having a hard time dealing with it.

He's just *alone*.

Seeking another person. *Anyone*. It's out of desperation.

But how can he be sure?

As George watches Dream across the room, idly tuning his guitar, he thinks about the easy solution just mere feet away. There's another man in this room. One with experience.

Recently, he's been thinking of Dream's bisexuality as less of a tormenting itch, and more as *opportunity*. The swirling illness inside him swelters; it *boils*, rising with a flood of red, *red* words and a mix of regret and relief.

He's ready to take an opportunity. There's a gap in the woven bars of his cage, and George wants to see the other side.

Pressure over pressure, he splits in two.

"How did you know?"

George's voice is like silverware against china, snapping the terse silence between all four walls. It's enough to make Dream stop in his tracks, hands faltering just above the neck of his guitar.

He blinks at George, once, twice; face lax in thought. It's filled with an emotion that's not quite shock, nor disgust.

Understanding eventually smooths out sculpted features. He knows the significance of those words. George thinks he sees a slight smile, even. There's a casual aura about Dream that wasn't there before, like his limbs have been stripped of all stress.

Relaxed.

George feels the opposite, brimming with electricity like a live wire, when Dream's lips part.

"I kissed a guy. Felt nice," he says, like it's the simplest thing in the world.

George catches a flash of metal behind teeth.

And Dream doesn't give George time to process the words before his fingers are dancing along

guitar cords- plucking and strumming and *poisoning, poisoning, poisoning*.

He's waiting. Waiting for George to back out, or step into the ring.

George knows it.

Another wave of nausea. But it's different, somehow. Less sickening and more anxiety-ridden, yet anticipatory. Like hummingbird wings, frenzied against the walls of his stomach.

His heart is beating out of his chest, nerves on fire.

Because there's a dangerous, *dangerous* idea at the tip of his tongue. He wants to step into Dream's world, if for just a *moment*.

It would solve so many problems.

It could start so many more.

But George is at his wit's end.

"Okay," he mutters. He doesn't even know if Dream hears him.

But there's firm resolve in his mind, for once. And George is desperate to end his incessant confusion- desperate to just *know* something, *anything*. Now, there's an opportunity, presented on a risk-doused, silver platter. George's name is carved into its ceramic, made of garnet and ash.

Fuck it.

His feet hit the floor. Soles pad across the room. They pause before Dream's bed.

Dream looks at him, unreadable. His eyes are whispering something.

They're saying, "*Take it.*"

For once, he will.

With a hand, George tugs the guitar to the side, off Dream's lap and onto the comforter. His palm *burns* where it meets primed wood- acid searing his pores, digging into skin and licking at his bloodstream.

How does Dream stand it- the power he holds, the burden he bears? It's baffling.

It's incomprehensible.

But George is willing to learn, now, if for just a minute or two.

He uses a nearby chair to hoist himself onto the bed.

Sunlight is dwindling behind the blinds. A pool of tangerine sky melts through the gaps, illuminating dust and specks kicked up in the movement. He sits close to Dream, close enough to feel his warmth, his bloodied claws, his magnetism. Dream's comforter is thick between his fingers. He grips onto it.

Stability.

Faint smoke, cannabis and cigarettes. Wet pavement, trodden leaves and heavy clouds.

George breathes it in. Invisible courage.

Dream is waiting, still. And George is ready to put an end to it. So he does.

"Can I kiss you, then?" he asks.

He doesn't recognize his own voice.

It's cautious- wary and tired. He's been through hell and back, over and over. It walks with him. It sits on both shoulders and chokes him, *stifles* him. He wants to leave limbo behind, desperately, *achingly*.

Dream doesn't even seem surprised by the request. There's a glaze to his eyes and a lilt to his mouth that exudes something akin to smugness- slight triumph, even.

George falters. Is he *that* predictable?

As if reading him, Dream lets a reassuring, warm thumb brush his thigh. George shudders.

"Never kissed a guy, I take it?" Dream reaffirms.

Trust in his vocal cords fails him. So George nods, and Dream's thumb grows bolder. An index and middle finger join its trek across his thigh; his prints tattoo themselves beneath clothing.

Dream is getting closer. Their shoulders are touching, knees bumping and breaths mingling.

"Why now?" Dream whispers, like it's a secret, somehow.

And, in a way, it is. It's all of George's fears manifested into two words. But he feels oddly safe, right now. Dream makes him feel safe. Where a few nights ago the touch at his thigh might've sent him spiraling, it now leaves him excitable, *anticipatory*.

So he spills.

"Because I need to know," George grits out. It shreds the inside of his throat on the way out, as if he's regurgitating razor blades and nails.

But the *relief*. The relief is *heavenly*. Because the nails and razors are gone now, and all he sees is *red, red, red*.

Red mouths. Red smoke. Red melodies.

Dream's fingertips feel like they belong, when they settle just below his jaw. Tracing ash trails along pale skin, tilting his chin up, up. Their eyes meet. Nerve-shattering, intimate, unmoving. A flicker of sadness traverses yellow-green. George's breath hitches.

But then it's gone, soon as it came.

And lips are on his.

It's nothing like what he's used to.

George is choking on scarlet, *drowning* in it. It coats the inside of his mouth and throat, drips down to his stomach and sets it alight. Warm. *He feels so warm*. His heart slows and thaws, nervousness melting away like ice in the sun.

Sunlight. George tastes sunlight when he tastes Dream. Jasmine, smoke, rain... and sunlight.

He tilts his head, pressing, pressing, *chasing*.

Dream is smiling. George's heartbeat stutters in his ribs.

And suddenly, Dream is *everywhere*.

Because his tongue is slipping through the seam of George's lips, spit on spit and breath on breath. Molten gold doubles, *triples* in his gut. The hand on his thigh squeezes, and it's enough to pull a noise from his chest.

George's lips and tongue are delayed. They're timid, flinching and pliant. He curses at himself, when he realizes. Because he's allowing Dream to lead. Leader and follower.

Then, he *feels* it. *Hears* it.

Click, click, click.

Metal against enamel. Silver against ivory. Dream's tongue piercing against *George's teeth*. A new burst of blooming heat spreads like wildfire, tracing down his spine and flaring in his belly. This time, it's not scary.

He wants more. He hates that he wants more.

George aches to reach out. Aches to touch and grab and scratch. But he doesn't. Because he's kissing a man. He's kissing *Dream*.

And Dream is good at it.

Nipping at his bottom lip with pointed canines and licking behind his teeth, allowing sin and ruby temptation to thicken their saliva into syrup.

It's sickly sweet. Like desire. *From George? From Dream?*

But he doesn't get time to figure it out. To gain confidence and slip *his* tongue through Dream's lips and taste his mouth.

Because then, it's gone. Vanished.

Trailing destruction, planting danger, infecting rationale.

George is left with spit-slicked lips and rosy cheeks. Heavy breaths and droopy lids. Toxins on his tongue. Smoke in his breath. And Dream is grinning. Mouth carved into a raw, goofy smile, pupils blown and freckles smothered under a blanket of *red, red, red...*

When Dream speaks again, George is still foolishly staring at his lips.

“George,” he rasps, “you wanna know something?”

He feels like he’s under a spell, when he agrees. A simple nod, eyes still glazed with whatever Dream has injected into his veins.

It’s like he’s accepted Dream’s joint on the rooftop. He wonders if the feeling is similar to this. Floating, dazed, *warm, warm, warm.*

Palms cup his cheeks, and George stops breathing. Because there’s pure, catastrophic *honesty* cascading from Dream’s eyes. Mirth and subtle cockiness and rapt attention.

With George’s spit on his lips and tongue, Dream whispers, “You’re really pretty.”

A cigarette flame reflects in Dream’s eye.

It’s a new sensation, the one he feels warm his face and creep up his neck. Never before has a man complimented him in such a way.

Pretty.

Pretty, pretty, pretty.

“You’re really pretty.”

When George stumbles back into the comfort of his own bed, his chest is stirring. A vat of swirling torrents and splintering resolve quakes beneath his skin. Because, *fuck.*

He liked it. He *really* liked it.

Kissing Dream is stardust and desires, a drug laden with nicotine and cannabis alike; it’s a never-ending fire.

But the thing that keeps George up that night has little to do with the kiss. It has nothing to do with his confusion, his internal debate, his conflicting morality. Nothing to do with him kissing a man, a *boy*, and liking it.

It has to do with what Dream said to him, just a few days ago.

It's the fact that Dream likes pretty boys.

Sin and Salvation

Chapter Summary

George plays dumb, mostly out of shock— out of hesitance and residual nerves. “What do you...”

His voice dries up.

Dream rolls his eyes. And then, there are hands on his own. Without rings, his touch feels like a hot iron against his skin. George can only *watch* as Dream languidly places his palms, quivering and ice-cold, on the flat planes of his chest.

Goosebumps speckle where George touches.

“Use me.”

Dream gives George an interesting proposal.

Chapter Notes

Hellllloooo!!

And, once again, welcome back to Dud Cigarettes! Lots happens this chapter and, as always, I'm very excited to show it to you :)

All of your comments keep me motivated to write and I cannot thank you all enough for the support!

TW Preface:

Panic attacks, explicit sexual content, and alcohol use

Yes... the explicit tag on this finally comes to fruition. However, please remember that this is a slow burn. Advancements are made in this chapter, but it doesn't mean everything is tied up into a pretty bow. People are complicated. Nothing is solved in one day.

There are still three more chapters ;)

Anyway! As always, enjoy, and feedback is very much appreciated. I might be uploading a list of all the motifs/symbols I use in this fic on my twitter, so feel free to follow me there for updates and such! Also major thank-you to my friend who betas all of these chapters! I wouldn't be able to upload without xem!

[Twitter](#)

If Dream and/or George ever say they are no longer comfortable with shipping/nsfw, this fic will be immediately taken down.

They don't talk about the kiss.

Even as autumn melts into winter and days shorten and skies gray. A good few weeks pass before the leaves shrivel and grass yellows.

And after all of this, they still don't talk about it.

Not in passing, not in the mornings or the evenings, not at *all*.

And George isn't quite sure how to feel.

He supposes he should be grateful for the space— the ample amount of breathing room Dream is leaving him. But he finds himself irritated, instead. Like there's an itch beneath his skin he can't quite scratch; an incessant rash that blooms red agitation and spreads like ash in the wind.

But, at the same time, George is *terrified* to talk about it.

Because while the itch is infuriating, digging into his nerves and blaring alarms in his brain, it also proliferates everytime he touches it.

The more he scratches, the more it spreads.

So maybe it's best to leave it alone. He's scared of the consequences.

The kiss was an *experiment*; one-sided and informative, unspecial and brief. Meant for George's benefit and his *alone*. At least, he's pretty sure it was, based on Dream's whole nonchalance about it.

They'd fallen asleep afterwards— the nerves in George's lips singing with the phantom brush of pink on pink. He woke up colder than ever. Joints coiled taut with residual stress and rolling

anxiety in his stomach. If he tried hard enough, he could almost *feel* the lingering of soft finger pads along his jaw, warm digits on his thigh, smoke in his lungs.

But he opened his eyes, and Dream was already gone. The bed that'd held the devil and victim last night now lay barren and hollow.

The latte left on his desk tasted bittersweet that day.

And he pretended he didn't see the smiley drawn crudely on the side with a sharpie. He knew which hands had created the shaky ink lines, which claw-tipped fingers had delicately trapped the plastic of a marker between their grasp— drawing a line and two dots, all for George.

Something new had flooded his core at the thought. Fuzzy, warm, and nauseatingly intense.

Affection.

Which is why George pretended he didn't see it.

But, he's weak. And stupid. So, *so* stupid.

So stupid, in fact, that he kept the fucking coffee cup.

He feels unbelievably *pathetic* for it. For the lack of ability to throw it away when the time came. It's as if the prints of his skin were glued to the sealed cardboard, heart beating obnoxiously on his tongue and a sinking feeling to his gut.

Thousands of these cups existed. Hundreds upon hundreds gripped in burnt-out hands, some dirty and abandoned on the ground, some yet to be used— pristine and stacked with dozens of others. Identical. Uniform.

But none of them had a dumb, charming smiley. None of them made George's insides go numb, made his brain smooth its ridges, made warmth swirl beneath the surface of aching skin.

So he kept it. Shoved it to the furthest crevasse of his desk drawer, hidden from prying eyes, *hidden from himself*, like it was a secret.

And it was. It was one of the most embarrassing secrets George had added to his arsenal in a *long* time.

He still tries to forget about it. Tries to ignore the tendency for his gaze to flicker to the handle of the drawer, as if he can see through wood. Tries to ignore the hammering pace of his heart in his ears whenever Dream gets close to the damned thing.

It's a constant reminder of how far gone he is.

Anxiety, endearment, and confusion crowds his brain until he can't see straight.

His notes end up falling victim to his restlessness alongside chewed lips and picked-at nail beds.

He writes, '*pretty boys*' in the margins of his chemistry lecture; he doodles smileys on the dog-eared pages of beaten textbooks; he stares at himself in the mirror and tries to pin the description of *pretty* to his forehead. Attempts to brandish his appearance with Dream's words, as if tattooing a new identity upon his features.

And when he fails to find beauty in the exhausted browns of his eyes and the hollowness of his cheekbones, he convinces himself Dream must've lied. George is anything but what Dream likes. He likes pretty boys who are confident and unafraid of themselves. Dream likes pretty boys who dig their nails into his back and carve their mouths into his neck.

And it's even worse, now, because the title 'pretty' can't even be associated with any girls George sees, any boys on campus; not himself, not others.

When he thinks of pretty, he only thinks of Dream.

And that can't mean anything good.

George finds himself on the rooftop more often nowadays. It's become a place of sanctity for him-

a reminder of the day he'd sat like a stone against the stairwell with Dream, feather-like, by his side, joint between fingers and dangerous leather around chilled shoulders.

The cigarette, George discovers, is gone. Perhaps the wind swept it off the side of the building, or maybe someone placed it in the trash alongside its decaying brethren.

He likes to think it's the former.

Right now, George is sitting here *again*, for the umpteenth time this week. Because he's thinking hazardous thoughts. Of course he is. It's like a habit, now- slowly tearing himself down like the crumbling foundation of a dam against erosion. Distractions can only help for so long. So he's on the rooftop again.

The open sky helps calm him, somewhat.

Branches of nearby trees have shed their last remaining leaves, barren and dry. They reach up towards the clouds as if their spindly fingers may one day grow to touch them; earth against sky, limbo against heaven.

George enjoys the crunch of shriveled leaves beneath his soles. It gives him some sort of power, feeling objects that used to drift so freely through the air be reduced to dust; an inevitable fate for such unshackled things.

He blinks.

God, what is *wrong* with him? He's jealous of fucking *leaves*.

This must be the lowest point- *has* to be.

George glances upwards, hands nestled in the pockets of his sweatshirt. The cool blue-gray of the sky is the same as it was this morning, but he knows it's going to rain. He can smell it in the air—the far-off aroma of dampness and humidity, windswept brush and sodden pavement.

He loves it. He hates it.

Out here, he still thinks of Dream. But it's less destructive in this atmosphere, somehow. Calmer, logical, and contemplative.

So George thinks about the kiss, as if he hasn't been doing that already for the past two weeks.

He brings two fingers to his lips, just to recall how Dream's had felt against his. The subtle scratch of stubble against George's jaw had been the only indication he'd been kissing a man. Because Dream's lips were tender, just like the tips of his fingers and the gait of his walk. His tongue wasn't repulsive; it was *addictive*, rolling against his own and spilling red down his throat. And his teeth weren't aggressive like how George imagined another man's would be. They were *strategic*, nipping when necessary and withdrawing with a tentativeness he didn't know Dream could possess.

At first, George really couldn't admit to himself that he'd liked it. It was only the morning after that he'd tried to completely dismiss the event entirely. Tried to pass it off as a dream, or as a misunderstanding— a *mistake*.

But it's exhausting lying to himself.

Because when he wakes up hard with the phantom taste of jasmine on his tongue and goosebumps on his thigh, he knows it's because he liked it.

And now, George is more lost than ever.

A puff of materialized breath clouds his vision in the presence of chilled air.

He hasn't been with anyone in months. Hasn't touched, hugged, kissed, fucked, *loved* anyone in so long. So maybe Dream is an outlet for his bodily functions, and nothing more. He's just a guy with a lithe body and lined eyes, living in close proximity, and George is pent-up. Emotionally, sexually, and everything in between.

He grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, trying to cancel the addictive feeling of claws in his shoulders. They're trying to drag him away from limbo, but in the wrong direction. They pull him down, down, and George scrambles up, up.

He finds a foothold.

George turns towards the stairwell. He'll prove it to himself, if the universe won't.

It's strange, being here again so soon.

The same townhouse that Dream had dragged him to weeks ago looms in front of him. The Greek pillars that'd seemed elegant before now look intimidating, and the sound of partygoers doesn't bring him any sort of joy, either.

It's the weekend, and students are mingling in the yard. Most are bundled up in coats and breathing each other's air, laughing and chatting and *living*. George trudges forward, past a group of girls clad in outfits that *must* make them cold.

When he enters the gaping entryway, George's heart rate immediately kicks up.

Dozens upon dozens of bodies shift to the thundering beat of music, strobe lights and neon oxygen painting planes of blurry faces luminous. His eyes pointedly ignore the couch to his right, gently shouldering aside stray hands as he makes his way to the kitchen. He chooses a Smirnoff, and lazes against the outskirts of the dance floor.

He gets through one, two, *three* drinks. All the while, he watches girls pass, their eyes flickering down and up, offering him cherry lips over ivory teeth.

It doesn't take long for one of them to approach.

A blond girl chats with him for a while. She's sweet and smooth like silk, and they're both a bit tipsy. George laughs at her jokes, and she giggles back, airy and high-pitched. It's as if he's chasing an angel, when she inevitably grasps his hand in her own, pulling him towards the mass of swaying bodies.

The long, painted nails against his palm feels foreign and slightly off-putting. Her fingers feel small between his own. It's disconcerting. His grip tightens, nonetheless.

Then, it's *hot*.

Everywhere— all-consuming. The air is tacky and several degrees higher in the midst of the crowd. Sweat immediately dots his upper lip when the girl— *what the fuck even is her name?*— loops her forearms around his neck.

He doesn't give himself time to think before grasping her waist, bumping limbs and elbows and tripping over feet. The third time he stumbles, ears stuffed with cotton, she laughs at him, a lighthearted glint to her eyes. She's saying something, but George doesn't hear her.

Because she's leaning in.

Close. *Too close*.

Alarm bells are the first thing he hears loud and clear in quite a while. They're overwhelming, ringing alongside the beat of blood in his ears. All his limbs stiffen when her lips mold against the curve of his throat. Panic grips him from the inside out. Spit stickies the skin along his jaw and George feels adrenaline shock his veins at each touch.

The claws dig in much deeper than normal, and George's grip is slipping. His palms are clammy, legs shaky and breathing uneven.

Glossed lips are nearing his own.

It's just a kiss.

So why does it feel like so much more than that?

His eyes are as wide as planets when hers flutter shut, inching nearer and nearer. The anxiety he

feels this time doesn't carry the same tinge of excitement it had when he'd kissed Dream.

Dream.

Fuck.

George pulls back before her mouth can crawl any higher. He looks salvation in the eyes. She's confused, brows drawn together, lips plump in a way that should be desirable.

He feels nothing.

The moments before he kissed Dream were terse and anticipatory. It had made his insides turn to mush, instincts crying out to close their gap. But here, there's nothing but hesitation. A swirl of nausea and a storm of regret.

The foothold crumbles, and George is falling.

Yet, there's a part of him that refuses to give up. A part of him that digs his fingers in a little harder, works his muscles and swallows breaths sharp as knives.

The universe is fighting him. He's going to fight back.

George grabs her shoulders and bites down the acidic bile in his throat, turning her around and pressing the line of his body against her back. She lets out a gasp- he can faintly hear it, when he presses taut lips against the delicate curve of her shoulder. They refuse to open and let her skin touch his tongue.

He doesn't close his eyes. Because he knows what sorts of images will replace the darkness behind his lids.

She smells like floral shampoo and citrus perfume. It's so pungent and saturated— like it's trying to mute the lingering memory of smoke and rain in his nose. But it does nothing but make him grasp for the fading scent, instead.

It's pathetic. Involuntarily chasing after the essence of peril incarnate, scrambling upwards but wanting desperately to just *let go*.

His mouth doesn't move. Maybe the girl is too drunk to notice or to care, but she doesn't say anything about it, either way. They sway side to side with the crowd. George still feels like his tempo is off, somehow. Her waist feels small between his palms— narrow and feminine, swooping and delicate. Long hair tickles his chin every now and then. He can see over her head; she's a few inches shorter than him.

It all feels *wrong*.

It's like failing to snap together the clasps of a jacket. Everything is there; perfectly aligned buttons that can easily find their partners. But, somehow, none of them *click*. There's no satisfying *snap* of metal fitting with plastic, no way to keep the lapels of the jacket together at the middle. They flutter open, and everything is wrong.

Everything is wrong.

The line of his lips against pristine skin grows into something tight with disgust. Sickness swells in his chest. He blinks away frustration and disappointment— in the universe, in *himself*.

He's about to step away, about to disappear into the crowd and run home until his lungs give out, but the world finally gives him a break, if slight.

A group of girls shoulder their way towards them, and the one between his arms immediately scurries forward to greet them. They're taking her home. The designated driver shoots him an apologetic smile, ushering her friends towards the exit with practiced haste. Before they leave, though, the blond girl makes her way back towards him, a bit unsteady, and leans up on her tiptoes.

He seizes up again, limbs stiff as concrete, thinking she's going for a kiss again. But, instead, she just places a gentle peck on his cheek and gets close enough to whisper something.

George hears it this time.

“Thanks for dancing with me. You’re really cute.”

Booze on his breath and roses in his nose, her presence lingers long after she’s gone.

The compliment he’d received feels empty. He hates that he knows why.

It’s because it’s lacking a pierced tongue to slip off of, a gravelly voice to cradle it’s syllables, the touch of soft fingertips to accompany it.

Both phrases echo and ricochet off the walls of his skull. It’s driving him *insane*.

“*You’re really cute.*”

“*You’re really pretty.*”

Goosebumps flit along his skin.

And it’s not because of the former.

He must look like an idiot right now, staring blankly at the ground— body unmoving in a crowd of bustling college students. He’s at a standstill. Like a stone, like a sodden leaf stuck to pavement, like a cigarette butt ground into dust.

He’s going to leave. He *should* leave.

But then, there are hands on his hips. They’re large. Fingernails blunt and digits thick. Hot breath fans over his shoulder, tickling the peach fuzz on his neck. A shiver traces down his spine when a low voice rumbles against his ear.

A proposition to dance.

A proposition to dance *with a man*.

Flames fan themselves into a wild frenzy at the pit of his stomach, fueled by gasoline anxiety and oxygen desire. He doesn't know this person. But the hands at his waist are lined with defined veins and sizable enough to substitute the man he's supposed to be forgetting.

He frowns. They're lacking the cool press of rings and the gentleness of touch.

But George is a little drunk. And he's tired. So, so tired.

The man is waiting— hands hovering and giving George a clear out if he so chooses. He could step away, walk out the grandiose door, and forget tonight.

His eyes squeeze shut, brain and body fighting. Curiosity laced with deathly desire fuels the beat of his heart.

And, just like that, the claws win.

George lets go— allows darkness to swallow him and breathes out relief when his screaming muscles are allowed to relent.

The dance is nice.

He's never been the one between broad shoulders before; the one with fingers in his skin and warmth at his back. He feels a slight flush of embarrassment when he doesn't quite know what to do with his hands. They simply latch onto the ones on his hips, just to grab onto *something*. If he imagines the heavy weight of metal along his knuckles, it's no one's business but his own.

Despite all this, there's no thundering nervousness in his stomach, no alarm bells in his ears— *nothing*.

George sighs, relieved. He hates what this situation implies. But exhaustion is winning.

And then, firm hips press against the backs of his own. Narrow, muscular, *masculine*. A surprised gasp flies off his tongue before he can swallow it down.

The sensation is *strange*.

Foreign.

Something stiff slots against his thigh, then his ass, and— *oh*.

George's cheeks flood red.

Warmth pools below his belt. His pulse skyrockets. The man dances with George, sure, but he also *grinds* forward. And George is embarrassed to admit he grinds back, if just a little. His pulse migrates lower.

Foolishly, *selfishly*, he imagines the face behind his shoulders, looming above him, is one adorned with glinting metal and delicate arches— pink lips and golden hair.

The ghost of Dream's voice rings through his head. Muffled memories string new syllables together, and they only aid in dragging George further down.

"You're really pretty like this, Georgie."

Spit thickens to syrup.

His own imagination betrays him with images of sweat-slicked tanned skin, flushed cheeks, and gasps and moans in the inflection of jasmine-laden vocals.

Fiery arousal shoots through his veins.

Fuck.

Blood leaves his cheeks and rushes between his thighs. It's sudden— dizzying and nerve-fraying.

George needs to leave.

There's another bout of panic threatening to shroud his vision, his pants are too tight, and it's getting difficult to breathe.

He doesn't even learn the face of the man before excusing himself and stumbling from the crowd.

Immediately, the air is cooler, lighter. The open sky stares down at him in pity. It does nothing to stave off the tears in his vision. They were bound to fall at some point tonight.

The walk back is painful.

The world sways, reality blurs, life stumbles.

But there are no hands to catch his missteps, no sugary voice to soothe his sobs, no warm, *warm*, pretty, *lovely* body to lean on.

George is so cold. He's shivering against the brutal chill of night, teeth chattering and tears freezing his cheeks raw.

It's started to rain.

Not quite cold enough to turn to snow, it stings his skin where it hits— icy and unforgiving. Raindrops mix with saline that falls from his waterline, creating a concoction of longing and trepidation.

As George climbs the stairwell to his dorm, he knows he looks like a mess. So when he enters his room— *their* room— he doesn't turn on the light. His footsteps are heavy and loud against the floor, aggressive in the way he shucks his too-thin jacket from his shoulders.

Ice solidifies in the marrow of his bones. He toes off soaked shoes and strips rain-drenched clothes from his body.

Dream is awake.

George can tell from the uneven lightness of his breathing from his bed across the room. But he does his best to ignore it, pulling on a dry tee and hesitating when his fingers go to pull off his boxers.

He can't do it. Knuckles freeze at their joints and refuse to tug them off in lieu of tonight.

They're damp— uncomfortable. But he *can't*.

His eyes flicker to the opposite side of the room.

Dream blinks back, feigned surprise raising perfect eyebrows. George can just barely make out the line of his jaw, bathed in a grainy moonlight, altered by the flicker of rain from the window. He acts as if he'd been sleeping, rubbing nonexistent somnolence from his features with a closed fist. A ring-barren finger taps his phone screen alive, taking note of the time.

One a.m.

There's vague worry in his gaze.

It makes George's brain *scream* at him to seek hellish warmth, to sidle against Dream's body and cry into his chest— blame it on the alcohol again and refuse to address it in the morning.

He swallows down the knot in his throat.

Shaky and on the verge of more tears, he instead crawls beneath his own deceptively-protective sheets and faces the wall. His limbs quiver, chest heaving, lashes wet.

Thunder crackles and splits the sky apart. Hot flashes of lightning stain the walls white.

“What’s wrong?” Dream murmurs, quiet compared to the rain pattering against the windowsill. His voice is stiff, yet still oddly calming. “It’s late.”

George’s lips stay sealed shut when emotions bubble up his throat. Thoughts, phrases, and words burn the base of his tongue.

Like acid. Like anger. Like guilt.

His consciousness cries out.

Everything’s wrong. I’m wrong. The latte cup you drew a smiley on is still in my desk. I think about your hands and how they’d feel on my hips. I dream about us sometimes. But I hate it. I hate you.

It’s your fault.

“Nothing.” George’s attempt at nonchalance is canceled out by the nasally-ness of his delivery and the tremble of his inflection.

“Sure as hell doesn’t sound like it,” Dream says, gentle as downy feathers and smooth like tea. There’s a few beats of silence. George prays it lasts forever.

But it doesn’t.

“George.” He blinks back tears, because he loves how Dream says his name. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Yes. Fix me.

“No, I really, *really* don’t, Dream. I just want to sleep,” George chokes back.

He knows he won’t be able to sleep well. If he looked over his shoulder, he’s sure Dream’s eyes would be swimming with enticing concern, arms ready to console and voice dripping with solace.

But if he doesn’t, he can ignore it. He can painfully, shamefully, *ignore it*.

Dream sighs, thick and heavy. George weighs him down.

“Alright. Just— I’m here to talk if you need it.” *Stop talking*. “Goodnight, George.”

He wishes Dream would stop saying his name.

He wishes Dream would move out.

He wishes Dream would just *fucking leave*.

But George knows he’d chase him down, even if he did. Because there’s something wrong with him. Something wrong with his head, his world, his tongue and eyes and hands.

Another flash of lighting. He hears Dream’s breathing stutter from across the room.

A frown splits along the line of George’s lips, violent as the storm outside, when he remembers.

Dream’s scared of thunder and lightning.

“Goodnight,” he eventually returns. Internally, he pleads for the tempest to soothe itself.

George falls asleep cold, yet surrounded by hell.

Dream knows there's something terribly, *horribly* wrong with George.

It's obvious in the way he treats him— tender in all the right ways, sugared and fleeting as if he may break.

Yet, he's not quite '*walking on eggshells*' around him.

Instead, it's as if Dream is gradually applying more and more pressure to the shells over time, easing up, then pressing down again. *Waiting*. Seeing how much they can take until they eventually shatter, serrated and messy like broken glass.

And George is splitting at the seams. That much is obvious.

Dream notices, of course.

Because he's been trying for conversation more and more nowadays— stopping him in the mornings and the evenings, bringing up menial topics with thinly-veiled purposes behind them. Anytime their conversation surpasses surface level and breaches personal, George runs away.

Is it rude of him? Yes.

Does Dream deserve it? No, of course not.

But it's nearly impossible for him to look the man in the eye anymore. Impossible to stare into green-gold that melts him from the inside out. Pierced features that flushes his cheeks and ignites wildfires beneath his skin. Freckles upon freckles that make him weak at the knee.

George spends more and more time across campus. In study halls, libraries, parks. Anywhere but

his dorm. He tries to sort his feelings and dilemmas out by himself— fruitlessly, *aimlessly*, grasping at straws.

He knows he still needs someone to fix him. But he foolishly lets himself believe he's strong enough to do it on his own.

Everytime he picks up a shard of himself, scattered about the ground, he cuts his fingers. Blood dots the pieces at his feet, dirtying what used to be his sanity.

Red stains concrete and eggshells until they blur together.

Red, red, red.

Even worse, George figures out the blond girl he'd danced with a few days ago is in his communications class. Her name is something that starts with a D.

The world just loves to crush him to dust.

Her smile is apologetic when they meet eyes across the classroom. They talk, sober and calm, about meaningless things that never stray past platonic, and it ends with her number on his arm.

Scribbled in permanent black ink, with a little smiley punctuated at the end.

His heart drops the more he stares at it. It sinks into the tar pit in his core— swallowed by harsh unease. But he still lets her distract him, if just a bit. He forces himself to talk to her everyday, to ignore Dream in the morning and at night, to shrug off the guilt heavy upon his tongue and limbs.

The guilt is knowing he's leading her on. The guilt is seeing hurt flicker in green irises when he brushes past broad-shouldered sin.

He tries to retain every little detail about her. Memorizing the slopes of her face and the dimples at her cheeks until his brain feels full again. There's no metal in tongues, no freckles upon the bridge of her nose, no subtle lining of her eyes. It's perfect.

Wonderful.

There's no red about her features, either. Instead, she's baby blue and white— feathers and halos. No poisoned claws on her fingers or hellfire in her eyes. She's all rays of sun and fresh air.

George breathes it in. He's become too accustomed to nicotine and cannabis oxygen, and, like an addict, his instincts cry out for him to crawl back.

But he's here right now, in a classroom with her— head in the clouds, body stuffed with excuses and gap-filling holiness. The number she'd written on his forearm is faded, but not completely gone, yet. He covers it up with long sleeves, like it's some sort of thing he's ashamed of.

The class is over sooner than later. She's getting up and leaving, flashing pearly white teeth and blunt canines at him before stepping away.

Just like that, George's temporary distraction is gone.

He sighs, and it immediately feels like boulders are balancing upon his shoulders again. Each folder and notebook is packed away in drone-like fashion, lips drawn into a tired frown. He's thinking way too much today. He can't recall a single thing she'd told him, despite telling himself he'd shove his brain full of her until he forgets everything else.

George sighs, just once, and steps out of the classroom. Students push past him in the hallway. Some lingering, some talking, some sitting against walls.

One of them is staring right at him.

He can feel a set of eyes boiling the surface of his skin, but he can't seem to find its owner. It's like a sick sixth sense, as he walks corridor to corridor— the hairs at the back of his neck standing pin-straight and alert.

Someone's following him.

The next hallway he turns to is barren and mostly empty, only occupied by one or two lingering souls. He pauses, if only to catch his breath. His chest feels sore.

When had he started gasping?

“George.”

His eyes squeeze shut, lungs struggling.

Fuck.

It feels like his airway narrows, as soon as he turns around.

Dream is lingering just a few feet behind him, eyes intense and brows furrowed.

The shine of his piercings look blinding today, and his honeyed hair, pulled into a half ponytail, seems more purposeful than ever.

He’s getting closer. George takes a few steps back.

Dream’s got his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, a mission in his gaze and a firm set to his jaw.

“What are you doing here?” George grits out. The rubber soles of his shoes squeak against polished linoleum, shuffling back even further. “I know you don’t have class today.”

In a small act of mercy, Dream doesn’t comment on how George had memorized his schedule, and instead offers a tight-lipped smile. His boots *click, click, click* against the floors, confident and sure as they press forward. “I just wanted to talk to you.”

Voice sweet, buttery, and warm, George can’t help but want to lean towards it. He stumbles backwards a bit faster.

“You- you can just talk to me later,” he responds, wavering. And he knows it’s a lie. Because Dream has *tried*. He’s *been* trying for the past week or so, but George shuts it down everytime.

Everytime.

Dream is getting closer, closer, *closer*. George can practically feel the heat and fire and *poison* he brings with him.

“That’s not true, and you know it,” Dream says.

The next few beats of silence are uncomfortable. Guilt reigns thick and heavy from George, while hurt comes off Dream in waves. Any other student in the hallway has long-since abandoned it.

They’re all alone.

George’s breathing hasn’t evened at all— still rapid and shallow as the beat beneath his cracked ribs. A hitched gasp echoes through the barren hall when his back collides with the wall. His fist flies to his chest, trying and failing to ebb the mounting panic in his veins.

It’s embarrassing— *just* how worked up another man can make him.

“George, *breathe*,” Dream murmurs.

And George just about *shatters* at the tenderness in his tone. There’s such a painful amount of sincerity that it makes George feel like even *more* of an asshole.

Then, there are hands upon his shoulders. Fingers, weighted with rings. Nails, pretty and short. They sear the skin beneath his clothing. Dream is all-too close, and George’s lungs are blooming with secondhand smoke. He gulps it in greedily with a single, terse gasp.

And then, he feels like he can breathe again. Dream washes over him like a tidal wave.

Doe eyes, trembling, seek the intense emerald above him.

“Are you ready to talk with me now, or are you gonna run away again?” Dream says. It’s hardly more than a whisper, with how close they are.

Regret flashes hot in George’s chest. There’s no blond girl to distract him, no corner to escape to: there’s no heaven in hell.

Resigned, he chooses to not say anything. He fears his voice may crack along with the rest of him.

But Dream knows what it means. So he gives a firm nod, and says, “Good.” His hands leave their perch on George’s shoulders, but they give him little time to relax. Because then, both palms are flat on the bricked wall beside his head, framing him— boxing him in and plunging George’s world a shade darker in shadow.

He bites his cheek, head plastered to the solidness behind him. It’s as if he’s reprimanding himself for the involuntary blush creeping up his neck.

“What are you— ”

“Just— just shut up, for a second,” Dream cuts him off. There’s a newfound grit to his voice, deep and serious, that makes George’s dry up. “I’m gonna speak my mind for a bit, and you’re gonna sit pretty and listen, okay?”

George doesn’t think he *can* speak anymore, even if he wanted to. As soon as the word ‘*pretty*’ flies from scarlet lips, his entire body goes numb.

Pretty. Pretty boys. Pretty, pretty, pretty—

He musters a small nod back.

“George, I— ” Dream stutters, and, suddenly, he looks so, *so* distraught. Brows drawn, eyes pooling with concern. “I’m really fucking worried about you.”

Oh.

If George's heart had the ability to sink even further, it would've dropped below the earth's surface by now.

"And I know you're confused, right now. I *get* it, alright? But— I don't know how much more of yourself you're going to destroy before you let me help you." Dream's words are so brutally *honest*. A pair of butterfly wings flutter in George's stomach. "Believe it or not, I can't read your mind, George. I just need you to talk to me, *please*."

The tension in George's muscles multiplies at the thought of spilling his turmoil to the man who caused it. He wills his mind to go blank. Because if it's blank, he doesn't have to *worry* or *think* or *say* anything.

So his lips stay sealed shut. He lets his hands do the talking, instead. They rise from his sides— deep, angry crescents embedded into his palms from where his nails had carved their name. Palms splay on Dream's chest, pointedly ignoring how every nerve there hums with electricity.

Dream is warm.

George's heart stutters.

And he *shoves*.

The force hardly moves him. The only reaction is a huff of breath, spilling sharply from Dream's nose.

George's jaw flexes. "I don't want to talk to you, Dream."

"I know," he admits, resolved and firm.

Movement startles George out of his staring contest. He can do nothing but swallow, *hard*, as

Dream's left hand leaves the wall to grab the ones at his chest. It's embarrassingly easy for him to fit both of George's slim, pale wrists in one palm. He lifts both hands away. Maybe George lets him.

His arms go loose, and one falls lax against his side.

Defeated.

But Dream holds on to the other one, thumbing across George's knuckles in a way that makes him shiver.

They lock eyes again.

It's frustrating— just how perceptive Dream is. The way he acts, the way he talks; it feels like he knows George better than himself. And maybe there's some truth to that.

Dream crowds him further against the wall. There's steely resolve glimmering in the blacks of his pupils. Like a challenge.

A challenge that says, "*Push me away again.*"

Close. He's so close.

But George doesn't push him away, this time. *Why isn't he pushing?* The hand in his squeezes. Dream's eyes flicker with mirth. George's pulse flutters— face lit ablaze in fiery embarrassment at his lack of action. That same red bleeds down his spine into his hips.

George shudders.

With disgust. With confusion. With *everything*.

He's so caught up in the feeling of Dream's rings on his skin that he hardly notices his free hand brushing just beneath his chin. Slowly, *softly*, a corded finger tilts his head up, up, until he can feel

hot breath on his cheeks.

It reminds him of the time they'd kissed. His body tenses— anticipating.

“You look like you’re waiting for something, Georgie,” Dream teases, mouth tilted into a lopsided smirk.

George’s lids flutter shut. A storm brews behind them.

“Dream...” he pleads. The name is broken, crackling and shaky.

He desperately attempts to suppress the swirling heat in his navel, the toxins in his lungs, the cotton in his brain. Because maybe if he can’t see the face that leads him to damnation, he can avoid it.

But, of course, he can’t run forever.

“Hey, look at me.”

And still, after all this time, his body cannot seem to refuse Dream. Chocolate brown returns half-lidded, clouded and heady.

Their faces are closer than they were before. Sparks fly beneath skin. Nerves sing.

“I was in your shoes a few years ago, you know? I can help you,” Dream starts, trailing off.

His gaze flits down to somewhere below his eyesight.

And, all at once, George can no longer see his face, his piercings, or his eyes. Because they’re *buried in the crease of his neck*. Rose-red, velvet lips hum near the slope of his throat. George feels the vibrations in his bones.

A pause. Heavy breaths. Neither of them move.

“Tell me to stop,” Dream whispers. It sounds like a veiled promise.

George can get away, still. The only thing keeping him tethered is the gentle hand along his knuckles, the lips an inch away from his neck, and the claws in his shoulders.

But he does no such thing.

Instead, he holds his breath and tilts his neck until hot breath fans along his jaw as well. Dream gives him more time. More time to push away, more time to *leave, fucking leave, run away*. But it only makes the itch beneath George’s skin multiply until he feels he may burst.

Then, the mouth against his skin starts to work itself open.

George *gasps*.

Soft wetness paints the column of his throat. Dangerous, enticing, *experienced*. That last one dully knocks at his heart. He tries not to dwell on it, right now.

His hand twitches in Dream’s hold—the other desperately wanting to cover the forbidden noises breaching the crest of his tongue. Everything Dream makes him feel is so new, so *primal*, he can barely put it to words.

Raw shame, desire, and disbelief shocks his jaw slack.

Where the lips of soft women at parties are painted a faux red with waxy lipstick, Dream’s are naturally, *blisteringly* scarlet. He could leave marks with just a *graze* of his bottom lip. George feels his skin stain cherry where he presses. And there’s no welling panic here—no overwhelming need to flee.

It’s exhilarating. It’s *scary*.

Dream pulls back, just enough to murmur words as red as his lips— perilous, tempting.

“Let me help you?”

It’s a question, not a statement.

An offer.

And George hates that he’s mulling it over. His body is screaming carnal, desperate words— wrought with pent-up frustration. Yet, his mind is lost, vision blurry as it trips over itself; one foot doused in hope and the other in anxiety-ridden nausea.

He’s at an impasse.

“Dream, I- I don’t know,” he chokes. “I don’t- I don’t even know what you *mean*.” It’s difficult to keep his voice steady, when petaled lips press a line of wet kisses just below the dip of his ear.

He clings, fruitlessly— *hopelessly*— to the lingering scent of flowers and citrus. To white feathers and baby blue outfits. To long blond hair and the fading ink on his arm. To messy smileys. To latte cups. To cannabis and smoke and rainfall and cigarette butts.

If George is an addict, Dream is a drug.

He’s a fallen angel putting on a show— *an imposter* . Nothing more, nothing less.

He feels sick again, when Dream leans back to look at him. Hot breath fans across his lips.

“I want you to use me,” he murmurs, grainy and rough as sandpaper. “Use me to help you, George.”

Fuck.

The words are purgatory. Flames lick up his ankles, his calves, his thighs.

George *burns*.

If he agrees, there'll be no way to climb out this time.

Their faces are close enough to share breaths— inhaling air that'd swirled in the other's lungs. George doesn't pull away. Dream is a magnet, and who is he to refuse the natural push and pull he's longed for?

So he leans forward, trembling— anxiety thrumming under clammy skin. Their cupid bows brush. Noses bump. Heart on his tongue, a stutter to his breath, *everything shatters*.

George's eyes suddenly shoot open- *wide*. Noise not belonging to either of them echoes through the hallway.

Footsteps.

And then, George remembers where they are.

Cortisol floods his bloodstream.

Alarm bells rattle his insides until he can't tell left from right.

His entire body goes into flight-mode, tugging against the hand still on his wrist and swallowing down bile. He's over-panicking— he *knows* this. But the thought of someone, *anyone*, seeing them — seeing *him*— like this makes his lungs constrict and tears well behind his eyes. Distress blinds him from all rationale when he tries kicking at Dream's shins.

Ring-adorned fingers immediately release where they've dug a home, and George snatches his hand to his chest. His breathing slows, only minutely.

The footsteps are getting closer. Dream needs to *move*.

“*Dream*, get away from me! *Please!*” he whisper-yells, hysteria pumping electricity through the fibers of his muscles. He feels like a live wire, ends splitting.

It’s more out of instinct than anything, when he shoves Dream aside and puts distance between their bodies. His arms cross his chest, hugging himself close as if trying to disappear. He doesn’t think he’s ever had less control of his body than he has around Dream.

The man makes his most barebones instincts emerge— ones he’s never experienced before. Thrilling, yet utterly *terrifying*.

Dream hovers a few feet away to keep the distance, hands suspended in the air, a frown pulling his lips earthwards. George calms himself, schooling his breathing just as heeled boots round the corner. A student passes, glued to her phone. There’s a brief second where she looks up to spare them a mere glance. Curiously, and with sickness in his stomach, George watches as recognition flickers in her eyes when they lock with Dream’s.

Shock paints his features when she sends a smile and a wave and a *wink* . But then, her pace continues. Like nothing happened.

The footsteps come and go, and Dream starts twirling his rings over and over— fidgeting, restless.

Click, click, click, clickclickclickclick—

The sound of Dream’s piercing against his teeth is like silverware on ceramic. It’s rapid, and it makes George’s blood *boil*. Any sort of anxiety evaporates; it’s replaced by confusing frustration that climbs out of his mouth before he can stop it.

Why is he so fucking angry right now?

“Do you know her?” George mutters, unintentionally spiteful. The question comes out embarrassingly green-tinted.

Dream, forever collected, tramples down his physical habits, shoving fists into his pockets and ceasing his relentless clicking. “And if I do? Why should it matter?”

George's lips open. Nothing comes out.

Dream scoffs.

"Exactly. It shouldn't," he says, closing the gap between their bodies with one step, *two* steps. George quakes, just slightly, as he stands his ground. "It shouldn't matter at all, but *you* think it does. Wonder why that is."

There's his cockiness.

Indignation, simmering like leftover coals, clogs George's airway. The coals disintegrate into ash, and he still can't grit anything out.

Because why does he care so much?

Dream doesn't touch him this time, when they're inches apart. Instead, George is simply left to flounder in smoke and fresh rainfall, foolishly craving soft fingertips and red handprints. Maybe it's Dream's intention.

Hook, line, and sinker.

"My offer is still open, alright? Figuring yourself out is fucking hard, and I get it," Dream says, sad recognition in his eyes. There's something dark there, too. It leaves George's tongue dry. "But I'd — I'd be happy to help you with more than just a kiss, if you'd let me."

Dream's next words are dripping with everything George wants to avoid.

"I want to open your eyes, princess."

He really needs to stop calling him that.

There's a long stretch of silence, then.

George's fingers dig into his biceps, hard enough to bruise. He's broken all over- beaten down time and time again, with shattered insides and drained muscles to show for it.

Tired. Exhausted.

He's done running from what his body seeks.

Closure. He wants closure.

Lips pursed, he lets himself breathe out his answer, even though he doesn't entirely know what he's agreeing to.

“Okay.”

Their room is cold today.

Maybe it's because Dream's been gone since eight this morning, taking all the heat with him.

He'd returned only fifteen minutes ago, clock striking nine at night. It was confusing how fast he'd sped in and out of the dorm; he'd hardly spared George a *glance*. Heavy steps, the snatch of a towel, a slam of the door, and he was gone again. Hardly enough time for George to speak, to ask, to *look*.

So now, he's alone— confused again.

All George knows is that there's gooseflesh on his arms and a chill to the air, kissing his cheeks

pink and nipping at his fingertips.

He's convinced their heating system must be broken, with how cold he gets sometimes.

It doesn't help that he's been on edge for the past two days. There's this sort of buzz beneath his skin whenever Dream brushes past him lately—limbs pulled taut with anticipation and nerves.

Just like with the kiss, Dream is *waiting*.

Waiting for George's queue, for his seams to burst and initiate whatever the hell it is he agreed to back in that hallway.

Tension thick as cigarette tar taints wherever Dream walks. He infects the very ground his soles touch—every particle of air and every speck of dust. And George is forced to breathe it in.

It's almost as if Dream is pressing twice as hard on him nowadays.

His hands linger longer than they should on George's waist as he passes by, his nose stud is abandoned for a small ring, his eyes glimmer with something like seduction. But it's a different sort of seduction than what he's used to.

Dream's is saturated, warm, and gentle, somehow. Light. Non-forceful. *Patient*.

A small part of George laments his own inability to muster confidence like he did when he asked for a kiss. It's more difficult, this time around. Because he doesn't know exactly what he's supposed to be asking for.

So they've instead let the tension multiply—let it brew and ferment until the air inside the dorm feels stifling.

The ink stained on his arm—evidence of his futile distraction—has faded almost entirely. Just a faint outline of the smiley remains. His finger pads trace along its edge, as if he can return its saturation out of sheer will. But, just like George's imitation feathers and feigned white robes, it continues to disintegrate.

Because that sort of thing doesn't work for him.

He's learned that the hard way.

His hands ache to thumb across the doodle on the cup in his desk, but, with great difficulty, he refrains. It's still embarrassing to think about, anyway. The cardboard secret makes him feel pathetic, but it also makes him feel like he's *melting*.

He's not sure which is worse.

George nearly jumps out of his skin when a knock sounds from the door. Knuckles rap across the wood a few times more, confirming he hadn't imagined the noise amongst his rapid thoughts.

Socked feet hit the floor.

He pads past crowded shelves and a dusty guitar case, past an unclean sink and a schedule pinned to the cork board on the wall. A stray sock from Dream at his feet, a shared coat rack to his right. Something sugared fills his chest.

Sometimes George forgets how domestic their living situation is.

Lithe fingers wrap around the handle of the door. It feels blisteringly warm against the numbness of his palm.

George doesn't catch the symbolism.

The door swings open.

And...

He fucking *short circuits*.

There's nothing in his skull. Nothing except thrumming warmth and smoke and *pretty, pretty, so fucking pretty*.

Dream's just come back from a shower— hair falling in wet waves along his forehead, beads of water pearling at the ends. They fall like raindrops from branches, trailing down the planes of his freckled cheeks and jaw. Piercings abandoned— features soft and rounded. Dirty clothes wrap in a bundle beneath the cradle of his arm.

He only has a towel on.

George can't stop staring.

"Sorry, I— uhm— forgot my key," Dream apologizes. "Thanks." His free hand rubs absentmindedly at the base of his neck, sheepish. It isn't often he wears that expression. One of slight shyness.

George flushes even more, for some reason. He's already bright red, but Dream is always able to multiply its intensity, it seems.

"I— " George's voice cracks. "It's— it's fine."

Neither of them move. George's grip around the handle becomes white-knuckled— *violent*. He's holding on by a thread of a thread.

Dream's bare chest is not a sight he's often greeted to. It's sparsely decorated with freckles, like the rest of his body. Droplets glimmer on his skin, reflecting almost as bright as his piercings usually do. He's smooth just about everywhere.

Slim, curved, toned. A pretty, cinched waist.

Like a girl.

But he blinks, and he's so, *so* wrong.

Dream is also broad, corded, *angular*. A happy trail at his navel. Thin at his hips.

Like a man.

Dream is a man, and George is attracted to him.

His gravity's stronger than that of Earth's pull. It's stronger than his ex's or his distractions' ever were.

Fingers twitch at his side. They ache to reach out. But they're held back by this irrational fear in his gut—the anxiety that threatens to bowl him over anytime fire flares at his hips. He inhales, sharp.

The air tastes like sin.

Dream notices his staring. His demeanor shifts to one more typical of his personality—something confident and smug. It's almost as if he'd *planned* George's downfall, with the surefire steps he takes towards him.

They're lingering under the threshold of the doorway.

George snaps his gaze away. It settles somewhere at his feet. Staring leads to realizations, and realizations lead to *panic*. He can't look anymore.

Dream raises an eyebrow in his peripheral.

“You gonna let me in, princess? Or are you gonna keep me out forever?” His voice is steadfast—lowered and deep.

The words hold more to them than what meets the ears.

But George just bites his lip, still unable to look Dream in the eye. It's a product of his weakness. Of his crumbling foundation. Of the flames licking up his spine and threatening to consume him whole.

It feels *wrong* to look at a man in such a way. To appreciate his dips and curves and impurities like he would a woman's— to imagine what each would feel like beneath his palms, his touch, his *tongue*.

A noise leaves the clutches of his chest.

"Look at me." Dream's voice is near enough to reverberate inside his head.

Like a weak, lost puppy, George's eyes immediately fall back upon him. They blink rapidly, and refuse to delve below his collarbones.

The exhale that caresses the apple of George's cheek is soft, when Dream goes to speak again. "You're allowed to stare, Georgie. It's not a crime to appreciate something you find attractive, you know?" he murmurs.

Forceful truth is hard to hear, but even harder to deliver. The carefully crafted syllables churn heat in George's core.

Molten gold pools south.

Instinctual retorts bubble up. They're a result of what's been ingrained into his soul for his entire life— words, lessons, and *rules* written like a script alongside his rationale. He knows he thinks Dream is attractive. But George is a man. *Dream* is a man.

And the script doesn't want to be rewritten.

He can't say it out loud.

Words fly out jagged as rocks, a garbled mess of fears and insecurities. It's a pitiful last-ditch attempt.

"But I'm— I don't find you— "

"You do." Dream cuts him off easily. And that's all it takes to get George to stop talking.

Because, *fuck*, he does.

And it feels oddly therapeutic to have someone else say it out loud for him.

So George allows himself to stare. To stare without guilt plaguing his mind as he does it. Dream is *pretty*, and George wants to feel his waist between his palms, his skin between his fingers, his teeth in his neck.

George doesn't think he's blinked once.

This should probably be a little bit awkward, given they're still half-loitering in the hallway, thick silence between them. But as George drinks in sharp collarbones and each and every blemish, the small indent below Dream's lip where his ring usually sits, the smudged liner at his lash line from his shower... he can't bring himself to *care*.

"Touching something you find attractive isn't a crime either," Dream notes. A soft smile brings out his dimples.

Startled, George blinks up at him, like a deer in headlights. Pupils blown, he lets the invitation fester. His hands begin to quiver. The grip on the handle increases tenfold, trying in vain to *hold on*.

But his palms are getting clammy.

And there's a trickle of water running down Dream's stomach, disappearing down, down, until it's absorbed by the towel. His tongue twitches against the roof of his mouth.

George plays dumb, mostly out of shock— out of hesitance and residual nerves. “What do you...”

His voice dries up.

Dream rolls his eyes. And then, there are hands on his own. Without rings, his touch feels like a hot iron against his skin. George can only *watch* as Dream languidly places his palms, quivering and ice-cold, on the flat planes of his chest.

Goosebumps speckle where George touches.

“Use me.”

Dream’s voice scribbles messy ink over the script, all with two words and foreign patience. But, still, it’s strange to feel a chest that’s not his own beneath his hands— especially one that’s not spilling between his fingers or lined with lush tissue.

The skin is taut— defined with only slight give. George knows this because his finger pads are experimentally applying pressure, little by little. His face burns.

Nervous hands trace, featherlike, along both pecs. They memorize every bump, groove, and imperfection of Dream’s ribs; they flit around to his lean sides, back inwards to his stomach.

Muscles ripple and jump under George’s touches.

It’s fascinating.

It’s nerve-wracking.

“How does it feel?” Dream asks airily.

George’s breathing goes all weird at the question.

You're so soft. You feel like rose petals. Everything about you makes me feel like I'm floating. Can I touch you more? Can I feel you beneath my tongue, my teeth, my lips? Would you let me?

No fucking way he's saying that.

"Like... skin?" George deadpans instead.

A beat, and then Dream is *laughing*.

He's wheezing that wonderful laugh of his, the one that makes the tips of George's ears go red and makes angels fall through clouds. Giggles pour from his chest. George imprints the vibrations he feels into his memory.

Dream covers his mouth when he laughs. George's heart thaws. "No, idiot. Oh my god. I meant touching something you've wanted to touch after denying yourself for so long?"

George purses his lips as he considers.

His hands move further down this time, splaying just below the divot of his belly button. The thin trail of hair beneath his fingers kicks up his heart rate.

Dream's breath hitches. It sounds almost as lovely as his voice.

"Scary," George eventually settles on.

And it is. It's fucking *terrifying*.

"Well," Dream starts, shuffling close enough to trap George's hands between them, "do you want to keep touching me?"

Voicing the chant of *yes, yes, yes* in his head feels like a bad idea. Instead, George's fingers dig in a

little harder to Dream's skin. He wonders how many sets of nails have dug into these very freckles. How many mouths have occupied the space he caresses. How many men and women have had Dream pliant beneath their bodies, exploring him like George is now.

But, *god*. He wants to be one of them.

George nods, just once.

It's enough.

"Then I'm yours for tonight, princess."

Dream presses them forwards. George inhales, sharp, at the heat of flushed skin against his front. The door swings shut. Clothes tucked under Dream's arm fall to the floor. They join the forgotten sock at their feet.

The time between stumbling from the door to the bed doesn't register.

George is sure they pass the coat rack, the cork board, the shelves. But the world blurs together until they're perched on the edge of Dream's mattress, feet dangling off the side.

George can feel crimson flames at his toes. Red in his vision.

There's a hand on his thigh. It's weight is encouraging. George's eyes flicker between their laps. He wants so badly to reciprocate. *But he can't, he can't, he's not supposed to, but he wants to, he wants to, he needs to, he needs to—*

His voice comes out strained from screaming inside his head for so long.

"Can I— can I..." George doesn't really know what he's asking for.

Everything.

He's asking for everything— everything and anything Dream can give him.

A sad smile traverses rose petal lips.

“I said use me, and I meant it, George. Do whatever you want; indulge for a bit.” Those same lips lean in close— close enough to brush the shell of his ear and send a shiver down his spine.
“Nobody has to know, alright?”

Gratefulness is a powerful thing.

Appreciation, affection, *attachment*; it all has George losing himself. To the moment, to his desires, to *Dream*.

He'll deal with the fallout later. Right now, he's in hell, and he *loves it*.

Something snaps.

It's *violent*.

George's hands are possessive and greedy where they grip the small of Dream's waist, mouth delving into the crease of his neck to *lick, bite, taste, suck*—

Dream's skin tastes different than his lips.

Where his lips are red and dangerous, his skin is *pristine*— innocent and like starlight upon his tongue. He brings it between his teeth and licks stripes along jutting collarbones.

The hand on his thigh grips firm and hard. Noisy exhales ricochet like a bullet where Dream breathes them into his soul. George doesn't even realize he's pushing Dream down until their world turns horizontal— bedspread against broad shoulders and ceiling outlined against narrower ones.

He's never felt this exhilarated touching someone. It's like he's flying thousands of feet in the air, no wings or parachute to show for it.

Just— suspended. *Floating*.

His hands hum with numb electricity from the patterns he smooths along Dream's abdomen. Up, down. Up, down. Brushing the top of the towel, then the swell of his chest, and back down again. Dream's fingers find George's biceps at some point, nails digging into the cotton of his sleeves.

He gasps, airy, *pretty*, when George thumbs across his left nipple.

Gold melts and pools between his thighs at the sound. George didn't know men's chests could be so sensitive.

And now he's straddling Dream's hips, and his tongue is catching a drop of water clinging to the man's throat. It tastes like he'd snatched it out of the sky itself. Red marks begin to litter his upper body. They look better than they ever did when Dream would come home late at night.

Because now, they're blooming because of *George*.

Newfound hunger, possessive and striking, lights a match somewhere in his chest. A patch of skin is calling his name.

Dream's throat forms a flawless curve when he *bites*, right at his shoulder.

He still tries to block out the image of his Adam's apple, bobbing and protruding outwards. It's too pronounced. Too rugged. There's a cut from his razor just above George's nose.

Fuck.

Panic swells, and George is frozen in place. His breathing picks up again.

He's a man, he's a man, you can feel his stubble across your cheek, this is wrong, this is wrong,

his chest is flat, there's a dick against your thigh, run, leave, what are you fucking doing—

“George, you’re shaking,” Dream murmurs. His hands are suddenly on his cheeks, and they’re looking at each other. Overwhelmed tears wet his lashes and trickle down Dream’s thumbs. They’re sudden, but Dream doesn’t look surprised. “Do you wanna stop?”

George doesn’t think before shaking his head. He wants this *so badly*.

“Dream,” he whispers, broken. He doesn’t know why he says it.

Gentle fingertips wipe away saline shame, caressing the apex of his cheeks. George is *trembling* when he sits up a bit and drifts his hands down, down— further than they’d gone before. His fingers trail along the knot of the towel, loosened by George’s weight.

He knows what’s under it. The knowledge doesn’t make it any easier.

Breathing is difficult, during this. But Dream is there to calm him down, to mutter gentle praises and soothe his stuttering ribs. A hand remains on his cheek while the other brushes along his knee, rubbing kind circles into his still-clothed skin.

It takes a single finger to undo the knot.

Threadbare cloth slides open. It pools about Dream’s hips— framing him against dark sheets.

A soft groan kisses George’s ears.

Dream turns red easily. His flush spreads down his chest and past his hips. George’s mouth dries up as his eyes chase it between his thighs.

And he decides then that pretending Dream was ever anything but a man was the dumbest fucking excuse he ever had.

Because Dream is worked up— breathing hard with marks along his throat and need in his eyes.

The muscles at his navel are coiled *tight*, bringing out the *v* of his hips and the curve of his cock. He's pliant, wanting, and *there's a dick between his legs*.

And George is hard because of it.

Straining against the fabric of his sweats, leaking into his boxers as deathly arousal courses through his veins.

It's *intoxicating*.

Infectious.

But George is still blinking back tears, breathing shallow.

"It's alright, George," Dream says. How he can sound so composed when he looks like *this* is beyond him. "Take what you want."

I want to see you fall apart, I want to see what you look like when you cum, I want to taste you on my fingers and kiss you until we breathe the same air.

"What I want is— it's *so much*," George's words are no more than a breath.

"And that's *normal*, George. It really is. Just— look at *me*. Ease yourself into it."

With quivering fingers that begin to drift downwards, George locks eyes with Dream and holds the stare, both men breathing hard into the stifling air of the dorm. He doesn't let his gaze leave the planes of Dream's face, when his fingers inevitably trail past the point of no return.

The first graze is unintentional— *sudden*. Digits brush Dream in a way that makes a low moan tear from his throat. It's deep; the timbre of it sending electricity down his limbs.

He sounds so fucking pretty.

It all falls apart from there.

Because George is an addict, and he craves *Dream, Dream, Dream*. His noises, his tremors, his gasps.

Dream's length is foreign beneath his fingers, but they wrap about him all the same. The skin there is hellfire— velvety and thrumming with pounding blood and warmth.

Where women are soft all over, Dream is rigid. Where women moan high-pitched and beautiful, Dream moans low and pretty.

So different, yet *so right*.

George picks up his pace, just to watch Dream's face go slack in pleasure, jaw dropping open to accommodate a string of whines and groans. George's hand twitches when slick warmth pools down his knuckles. He can't help but break Dream's advice, glancing down between their bodies.

Oh, *god*.

"Fuck..."

The swear slips from the hollow solitude of his chest.

Because Dream is *dripping* over his fingers.

It glistens off the backs of his knuckles, slicking the movement of his palm against beating flesh. The muscles at Dream's navel twitch and flex, cock jumping beneath his touch.

It's so *new*.

Exciting. Intimidating. George doesn't know anymore.

But he grips a little tighter, jerks a little faster, and bends to nip at skin.

Dream gets more vocal, hands clawing at George's shoulders and thighs.

"Ah, George— *shit*— " A choked gasp seeps from between his lips.

And George has decided *this* is the way he loves how Dream says his name.

Lust-filled, breathy, *forbidden*.

It's almost better than his music. *Almost*.

When Dream gets close to the edge, he starts getting *loud*. Airy, long moans bounce off walls. Smoke and sex cloud George's lungs and vision. Dream's brows draw inwards, green eyes half-lidded as he writhes on the sheets.

His spine arches.

He looks more graceful than any girl George has been with.

It's no wonder he could get around with anyone he wanted.

But he suppresses that thought. It only paints sourness on his tongue where he craves *sweet, sweet, sweet*.

His finger traces a vein on the underside.

"George, so good, *fuck*—" Dream moans, rasped and strained. "Gonna cum soon, b—" "

The last word is clipped. Dissolved. Like he'd cut himself off, lips clamping shut with haste.

George has little time to think about it.

Because Dream's nails somehow tear through skin, even with cloth in the way. Reality swims in George's vision as pain burns up his arms. His thumb clumsily digs just beneath Dream's tip, tightening, *tightening*.

He wants to say something. Wants to return the praises and thoughts inside his head.

But he still can't.

After all of this, he still feels *weak*. Pathetic.

Fingers dig deeper. A flash of metal embeds itself into George's retinas when Dream's tongue lolls out. He's *panting*.

Cum for me, Dream. Not for anyone else. Not for the waiter, not for the girl in the hallway—for me.

George lets something slip out. It's hardly more than a whisper, but it's there. He almost can't believe it, when his voice shatters the atmosphere.

"Pretty."

Hushed. Gentle. *Honest*.

Dream crests with a gasp of his name.

And, for a moment, George believes there may be a heaven in hell, after all.

Sin dirties his hand and Dream's chest.

Unpracticed fingers work him through it, shakily stroking until he fears it may be too much.

Heady gasps eventually slow. Fingers uncurl; claws sink until they hit bone. They're permanent, now. He might learn to live with it, yet.

Dream's hair, still damp from his shower, splays around his head like a thorned crown. It looks ethereal enough to be a halo.

Endorphins and adrenaline flee George's system. And then, everything's *empty*.

Awkward. Tense.

George stiffens.

What the fuck did they just do?

Stickiness coats his left hand. It feels like tar. His sweats are still tight. Nausea rises, stinging his eyes and throat.

He supposes the fallout had to start at some point.

Then, there's a hand creeping up his thigh, and Dream is speaking. "Do you want me to...?" He gestures vaguely to where he's straining.

Alarm bells that'd been quiet for *so long* return with dreadful forcefulness. He feels *humiliated* by having it pointed out. By Dream reminding him how *painfully, horribly* hard he is.

All because of a *man*. Because of masculine moans and flat chests and pierced tongues and *Dream*.

His clean hand yanks the hem of his shirt down, as if to cover his shame.

Cover it like the ink on your skin. Cover it like the cup in your drawer. Cover it like you cover everything else. Cover it, cover it, hide it, hide it, hide it—

“Don’t touch me! ” George cries out, voice watery.

His body shuffles away from Dream’s hands. They’re destructive, and George is already so fragile.

Dream snatches his arm back. Hurt crosses his gaze.

It’s brief, but it’s still there.

So George stays closed off— as far as he can get. He’s too frozen for someone as warm as Dream.

“Hey,” Dream murmurs, light and airy and sweet and everything George *hates*, “it’s completely fine; I won’t touch you there. This is about you, okay? We only go as far as you feel comfortable with.”

All the air leaves his lungs.

George flinches as Dream cradles his messied palm. He sits up, slowly, as if George is an injured animal, ready to sprint and hurt itself more. Rose petal hands— *destructive hands*— wipe evidence of sin away with a damp edge of his towel. It caresses the crease spanning the width of his palm.

Cloth wraps around one finger, then the other. Tension dissolves in George’s shoulders as the evidence is erased, slow but sure.

It starts raining outside.

Gentle patters of droplets hit the window. It’s not a storm; the clouds never allow for more than a drizzle, nor do they split open and vocalize their distress. It’s all gentle, soothing, and lovely.

George sighs, pliant under skilled hands.

“Let me get cleaned up, then I’ll be right back, okay?” Dream’s voice practically melds with the sound of rain. It’s then that George remembers he’s still in his lap. Heat creeps up his neck. He gives a small nod before shuffling off freckled thighs.

“Thank you,” he says with a honeyed smile, swinging long, *long* legs over the edge of the bed.

George looks away while he grabs clothes and leaves to change. It still feels wrong to stare. His fist clenches around Dream’s comforter, steadying himself as he lowers himself to the floor.

There’s a flash of shame when his legs shake.

Is he really that worked up?

His sweats are still tight, but not as uncomfortable as they were before. Walking is still a bit of a chore— knees knocking and feet dragging. It’s a miracle he makes it into his bed without tripping. He lays down, facing Dream’s side of the room.

Exhaustion is suddenly heavy in his bones. He didn’t know he’d been tense at each of his joints until now.

When Dream comes back, he’s in boxers and an oversized hoodie. It swallows the tips of his fingers and hangs off his frame, down to mid-thigh. George bites his cheek at the sight.

There’s no time to think before smoke curls around his windpipe.

Dream is right in front of him, eyes melted around the edges and swimming with something warmer than usual.

“Hi,” George croaks out.

A soft chuckle. The rain picks up a bit. Dream's hand rises to comb through George's fringe, front to back. "Hey."

The fingers at his scalp make his lids heavy. George hums, strangely content.

"I'll let you sleep in a second but— uhm," Dream pauses to swallow and *click, click, click* a few times. He looks a bit hesitant, but still cocky, somehow. "How— uh— how was it? For you, I mean."

Eyes widen. "*Oh.*"

George is bleary enough to convince himself he's dreaming. A rock sinks in his stomach. He knows what tomorrow will bring. It'll bring denial and guilt upon guilt. Grief. *Confusion.*

While nighttime feels freeing and isolated, daytime feels stifling and exposed.

But it's still dark outside. And George allows himself to be free, if just for a bit.

"I... I liked the noises you made."

A secret, spilled into the open air. George feels just a little lighter.

And Dream— Dream's reaction is *perfect*.

Green eyes expand, pupils blown. His lips part, and a brilliant blush paints his cheeks, his nose, his *ears*. George might even say he's glowing in the darkness of their room.

Brighter than the embers of a lit cigarette.

"That's— " Dream looks away, "that's— uhm— *good*. Okay."

George smiles, just slightly.

He feels warm.

The last thing he sees in clarity is Dream leaning forward, fingers pressing his bangs flat to the top of his head.

Rose petals.

They stain a spot on his forehead, just below his widow's peak. He foolishly wishes they would stain his lips, too.

The rain is steady and calming against the windowsill. It promises wet pavement and puddles in the morning.

Sodden leaves stuck to concrete.

Humidity in lungs.

George falls asleep, but he dreads tomorrow.

Needs and Wants

Chapter Summary

He knows he can't do this anymore.

Can't pretend like he doesn't want Dream in every way he can't have him.
Can't listen to himself *deny* and *reason* and *scream* anymore.

Last night made things worse.

Because all George can see when he blinks is *Dream, Dream, Dream*.
Dream panting and gasping. Dream bare and splayed under him. Dream in his palm. Dream between his teeth. On his tongue, in his lungs, dripping over his fingers.

Everything is fucked. Everything is *wrong*.

George figures things out.

Chapter Notes

Hi again!

Wow, it has been a little while since I uploaded, but I swear it wasn't intentional. I've been unbelievably busy, but I hope you all didn't think I abandoned this project :) I'm going to see this through until the end for sure; life just hasn't given me a break. Please enjoy this chapter! I put a lot into it and, as always, I'm very excited to share it with you all.

The song used during this chapter is *If I Get High* by Nothing But Thieves. Yes, I used another NBT song, sue me. You can listen to the original or the second version; I think both do a good job at setting the tone.

Warnings for this chapter:

TW: Smoking, drug use, explicit sexual content, minor panic attacks, vomit mention

I think that should be all. Please stick this chapter through :) I swear there is a reason for everything! <3

[Twitter](#)

If Dream and/or George ever decide they're no longer comfortable with nsfw/shipping, this fic will be immediately taken down.

George awakes to the sound of trickling water.

Humidity settles in his lungs and upon his limbs. The tongue against the roof of his mouth feels dry. He aches to lap up the beads of water trailing down the window pane as they *plink* against fogged glass.

Phantom wetness coats his taste buds when he swallows, as if he's still dreaming.

He shifts.

Ah. His mouth etches into a taut line.

George is hard.

Again.

It's not nearly as surprising as it used to be, this time around.

So he just sighs, and rolls onto his stomach. Pillow against cheek. Sheets curled in fingers. His comforter had been kicked off late last night— pooled in a heap on the floor below.

The skin around his eyes feels crusted and heavy, raw from wiped-away tears and restless tossing and turning. He's halfway between sleep and consciousness, when he blinks open his eyes— misty and fuzzed at the corners.

Dreary slats of sun drench the carpet a dull warm color. Specks of dust and debris in the air shimmer where the light falls, and George admires the sight for a few seconds.

A ruddy cheek nuzzles into the cool pillow beneath his head. It does little good to wake him up

fully.

His lips part, breathing out a quiet exhale, when his hips deliver minute grinds into the mattress. The pressure feels like heaven— fanning the sizzling flames in his gut. Pleasure slowly but surely begins to encroach the muddled swirls of arousal in his brain.

The room falls into focus a bit more.

George feels his heart skip a beat, when he realizes Dream is still in bed.

He's asleep— lashes kissing cheeks and palms curled next to his head in a gentle curve, sheets tangled about his shins. The hem of his hoodie is hiked up, unveiling planes of taut skin and muscle at his stomach.

George shudders when he thinks he sees a bruise peek at him from the arch of his ribs.

Uneven breathing picks up.

Sleep still has its threads snaked around his bones.

George does little to stop his body's increased pace against the mattress.

Something about seeing Dream like this—so peaceful and soft and delicate—churns white-capped waves in the depths of his stomach.

Half-lidded eyes take in the hip bone jutting from where boxers have slid down, the faint trail of hair connecting belly button to pelvis, the rise and fall of breathing he'd felt fanned upon his skin in lieu of honeyed moans and whines and—

George freezes. His eyes glass over.

Oh, god.

Last night.

It comes back to him in hazy bits and pieces— the sounds, the feelings, the *touches*.

His senses betray him, when the memory of panting, pierced tongues and blunt nails in his arm only serves to make him *harder*, somehow.

He bites his lip to suppress a noise when his abdominal muscles coil tight.

Neediness akin to what he'd denied himself last night drives him to continue the subtle, rapid movements of friction at his hips. It feels wrong, *dirty, horrible, what the fuck are you doing, leave, leave, leave, stop, stop, stop—*

But he doesn't. He doesn't fight it— doesn't even *try*.

Instead, his frantic consciousness fades and slips from his grasp, replaced by a drunken chant of *more, more, more*.

Body on autopilot, rose petals reflected in his pupils, humidity plastered to the inside of his lungs — George listens to birds chirp and rain splatter upon the window sill as he grinds, and grinds, and *grinds*.

He knows it's only because he's pent up from last night.

But the memory of teeth-bitten lips parting around the sigh of his name— *George's* name— leaves little room for reasoning.

Dream stirs, just slightly, to press his face further into his pillow. Cherry blooms where skin drags against fabric. His fingers curl further inwards and grip the baggy sleeves of his jumper.

Everything about Dream is fascinating to George.

The way he's able to carry himself with an air of arrogance, yet still possess gentle selflessness; it's baffling in some aspects. Dream is confident and dangerous and everything George should avoid. He should seek stability— something sturdy and rooted in sublime ease.

And yet, here he is.

Tirelessly fawning over an addiction he should be weaning off of. Stumbling after the embodiment of hell when he should be seeking heaven. Fantasizing about large hands and glinting metal until he's rutting against his sheets like a fucking *animal*.

But there's still a glaze over his eyes. Sleep continues to gnaw at his brain, lids heavy and movements sluggish.

So George lets himself dwell in the memory of last night as if he's not awake at all. Allows himself to recall what it was like to cradle Dream's waist and press lips to his collarbones. To be the cause of an endless faucet of pleasure that had slipped off a tongue drenched in red, to have felt the burn of claws itch down his spine, to have *watched* as Dream unraveled and fell apart.

All because of George. Because of his lips, his tongue, his hands.

Stroking, tasting, *memorizing*.

Dream stirs again.

The scar on his brow bone twitches— once, twice— with the rest of his face. Oakwood strands splay along his forehead, mussed from bedhead. Freckles on his nose bridge flex with each spasm of his muscles, tongue darting out to wet dry lips.

They emerge slick and shiny. So pretty; so *kissable*.

Pink, soft and warm and *gentle* against his.

Tongue, heady and tactical, mixing spit with spit.

A quiet *click, click, click* against his own teeth.

George's breathing stutters.

Hips *press*.

The fire in his gut crackles and splits in two. His lips part in a choked gasp.

It's violent— it's *euphoric*.

The sudden rush of endorphins is so off-putting and unexpected that it shocks chocolate eyes wide open. His world unblurs, and the surroundings are crystal clear, now. Sleep washes away from his body until he's strung tight with panic.

Did that really just happen?

Warmth rushes to his face. His legs are shaking, heart beating like thunder in his ears.

A hand snakes its way between his thighs.

Maybe he's still dreaming.

He's not.

Humiliation settles deep into his core when his palm is greeted to unwelcome wetness.

The walk of shame to the bathroom is uncomfortable and fucking *embarrassing*.

Ears singed with red at the tips, knees knocking together, heels dragging. He feels like he might

throw up, when he strips his shirt and matted-down, messed boxers from his hips and turns on the shower.

Water feels scalding where it lands on rosy shoulders and tacky skin.

Steam clogs his lungs and plasters hair to his forehead. George welcomes the stifling feeling, gritting his teeth while he attempts to shrug off the heavy cloud of shame looming overhead.

He only realizes how badly he's shaking when he drops the body wash. The clattering of plastic against ceramic echoes, loud and unforgiving. It lay forgotten on the shower floor when he shoves his face in both palms, threading unsteady fingers through his hair to *pull*.

A lick of pain sears his scalp.

He pulls harder. *Harder*.

Isn't it horrible that he craves so much more? He craves pain to distract— pain that'll reprimand his horrid actions and condemn him from tempting sin ever again.

Because he just came, *in his pants*, to the thought of the man that had been asleep ten feet away from him—

All without even touching himself.

That's never happened before. *Ever*.

George feels sickness well in his throat.

"Fuck... *fuck!*"

His vocals rebound in the hollowness of the bathroom. They ricochet, purposeful and taunting, in his ears. He groans. That, too, reverberates.

He knows he can't do this anymore.

Can't pretend like he doesn't want Dream in every way he can't have him. Can't listen to himself *deny* and *reason* and *scream* anymore.

Last night made things worse.

Because all George can see when he blinks is *Dream, Dream, Dream*. Dream panting and gasping. Dream bare and splayed under him. Dream in his palm. Dream between his teeth. On his tongue, in his lungs, dripping over his fingers.

Everything is fucked. Everything is *wrong*.

He doesn't even realize he's crying until it's too late. He's been doing that much too often lately—falling asleep with red-rimmed eyes and salt tracks on his cheeks.

Never before has he cried this much.

He doesn't even consider himself an emotional person, but something about Dream strips him of all barriers—drags his walls down until he's crumbling like rock eroded from heavy rainfall. There hasn't been a time in his life when he's ever been this vulnerable—this *exposed*.

When he steps out of the shower, the steam turns to smoke. It twirls about his shins and loops around his wrists. It chokes him, stings his eyes, burns his throat...

Eyes flutter shut.

But it feels *so good*.

So *wrong*.

His reflection is tired. Hair wet and curled at the tips, lashes clumped, eyes swollen. *Pathetic. Defeated.*

Something brushes his foot. He looks down. Dirtied underwear stares back at him.

He can't fucking do this anymore.

George tugs on fresh clothes like a drone, unblinking. He throws the boxers away on his way out of the bathroom, fingers curling in a death grip around his towel when he goes for the handle to their room.

Beads of water drip from sodden hair into his vision. The world goes fuzzy again.

Maybe it'll make this easier.

Inhaling deeply, George enters the dorm.

Dreary sunlight filters through split blinds, casting golden rays to pool upon shame-drenched beds and shared, solemn floors.

In the center of it all, soaking up rain-acquainted sunshine—is Dream.

He stands on the carpet between their beds, loose jeans falling low on his hips. He's looking out the window as his fingers fumble with the buttons of his shirt, tan hands drowning in luminescent light. Rings glint where they rest—piercings in place and making Dream's rounded face into something more angular.

A sleeve slips off the shoulder closest to George.

He rips his gaze away, aggressively, when he notices the hickeys littering his neck and chest. No longer does George have to wonder which lips and tongues have brought blood to the surface of Dream's skin.

Because it was *his*, this time.

A flash of pride aches through his veins. It's followed by the sting of shame.

Dream seems to finally pick up on his presence, when George's exhale gets caught in his throat. Gold-green eyes latch onto his figure. They're bright and content—glimmering with dewy sunlight.

George feels his heart sink.

Dream's halfway through his buttons, when he offers a small smile. Dimples make an appearance. "Good morning."

His voice is worn and gritted. Staccato and sandpapered.

Like honey and tea and rain and chocolate and—

Maybe George should leave. *Right now.*

Because under the light of day, Dream's bruises seem all-too saturated. His hair is too ruffled to be from sleep alone. The dirty towel in the laundry basket looks like a glowing beacon under the sun.

Last night *happened*.

It happened, and no amount of darkness can shroud that fact.

Silence blankets the room for longer than it should. Dream seems to notice the absence of George's voice, throwing an eyebrow up in mute questioning.

"Everything alright?"

And, of course, he's as soft-spoken as ever. Gentle with his delivery and calm observation in his expression.

It makes goosebumps break out across George's skin. And that can't mean anything good.

George swallows down the pinpricks in his throat.

"Dream—I—" he chokes on grated syllables. He *stares* as Dream looks at him with mild confusion, head tilted to the side. George curses at himself when his heart flutters.

Maybe he just shouldn't say anything at all.

So he purses his lips: A feeble attempt, really. But the seam splits with ease at the rise of foolish, *foolish* words, and he goes numb.

"Can we pretend yesterday didn't happen."

A statement.

Not a question.

The delivery is so barren and disinterested that it shocks George himself, to some degree. Chirps of morning finches outside the window seem to go quiet.

Fire cools. Smoke dwindles.

Dream's face falls, as the words sink in.

It goes slack— smile dragged into a crestfallen frown, wrought with perplexion. His hands pause, and the last two buttons of his dress shirt flutter open. It's as if the glow in his eyes flickers out— snuffed away like a flame doused in water.

Like cigarette embers beneath a shoe.

George's chest aches, for some reason.

"*Oh*," Dream mutters.

He looks away, lips parting and closing, like he wants to say something. His brow stud shimmers as a line is drawn between his eyes.

"Did I— did I do something wrong?" Dream's voice breaks a bit. His hands find each other, twirling rings and playing with the webbed skin between his knuckles. "I mean— it's fine, like, I get it— and stuff. But— I didn't think that— " he pauses to swallow, Adam's apple bobbing, "— nevermind. We can— yeah. We can forget about it."

Click, click, click. The sound of silver against enamel is rapid and nerve-wracking.

George feels empty. Hollowed, even, when he breathes a sigh of strained relief. "You didn't do anything. I just— I realized I didn't like it. It's just me."

The lie is purgatory.

Nobody believes it.

And yet, Dream just nods, resigned.

"Okay," he murmurs.

The dress shirt is buttoned up, slow and sure. His composure rebuilds itself, piece by piece, until stoic nonchalance makes him a mystery once more. Each bruise that stands as evidence is covered by fabric, one after another. Then, they're gone. Vanished from sight.

George watches, in real time, as the mask is slipped back on. He didn't realize it'd been off for so long.

Plated armor conceals his wounds, and chain mail hides defining freckles and vulnerability. The dent above his left breastplate has been scuffed out. George can no longer recognize his knight.

And why should he? He's the fool, after all.

A terse moment of silence deafens the room. Cooly— *dignified*— Dream's hand rakes through his hair before turning back to George.

A smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes plasters itself across rose lips. "I guess I'll head to class, then, yeah?" His book bag is slung across his shoulder, brushing past George to access the door.

He doesn't turn around to look at him when Dream says, softly, "See you."

George doesn't say anything back. He feels ill.

The door shuts. And it's as if his feet have turned to cement, melding with the floor. He feels heavier than ever.

Limbs turn to jelly when he recalls the way Dream's expression had changed so suddenly. From relaxed happiness to downcast and despondent. Anxiety mixed with vague regret makes him lightheaded.

His heart beats faster. Tar bubbles in his stomach, rising, *rising*.

Bile in his throat. Acid on his tongue.

Oh god.

George is sick into the trash bin.

He sputters and coughs as his stomach empties itself alongside any progress he'd made yesterday.

Tears spring at the corners of his eyes. Saliva strings from swollen lips as he quivers above the trash can.

And he doesn't sob. Doesn't cry or wallow.

He just numbly cleans himself up. Changes the trash bag and brushes his teeth, head stuffed with cotton and ears filled with uneasy emptiness.

George opens his phone. He thumbs through his notes app until he finds what he's searching for.

Ten comforting digits stare at him— ones that he'd half-heartedly jotted down a few nights ago.

Just in case, he'd told himself.

Copy. Paste.

The message app opens, and George types.

Then, he sends.

'Are you free tomorrow?'

Dream doesn't come home that night.

George stays awake for him until two in the morning— waiting, *waiting*.

But he never shows.

So George spends his time nervously picking at the threads of his clean bedsheets. He'd washed them twice that day, as if laundry detergent would somehow undo the events of last night.

His bed smells sterile. It eases his anxiety, somewhat.

He also spends his day relearning music. The earbuds that'd sat abandoned in his drawer are cleaned with alcohol swabs and cotton buds until they gleam pristine white.

Rock music and nineties classics attempt to fill the void between his ears. But as night creeps closer, the melodies start to all sound the same. They sound like gentle guitar strings and calm hums. Like the push and pull of the tide against a rain-swollen shore.

Like soft fingertips against stubble. Like red mouths and churning skies.

George decides listening to music was a bad idea.

But he never presses pause. He just tortures himself for hours on end, biting his lip to *Wasteland*, *Baby* and songs that caress the Dream-shaped initials in his core.

The song ends, and another begins. Dream hasn't come home yet.

The clock strikes one-thirty-two a.m.

George can't sleep.

It starts raining again, right as the guitar melody kicks in. A flash of lighting in the distance. The rumble of thunder in his bones.

'I'll meet you at the divide

To break the spell...

George feels the storm outside migrate to his chest. It tightens— heart snared with knots and chains.

'A point where two worlds collide

Yeah, we'll rebel...

Some foolish part of his mind wishes Dream would open the door. Wishes and *hopes* that he'd enter with tidy hair and neck still stained with bruises he knows the origin of . With no clothes askew and no body attached at his hip.

With a smile and skin still molded to George's touch.

'And we run

Until we break through...

But George knows the sinking ache in his stomach very well. He knows how Dream spends his nightly outings, and no amount of *hope* can change that. He hates feeling broken by the crush of his own hands.

It's horrible— how George can push away the one thing that's been good for him and still feel betrayed.

'If I get high enough

Will I see you again?'

He reminds himself that he has no right to feel that way. No right to feel this *empty*. Because he did what was best for himself, right?

'I feel my loss every night

Not long to wait...

...Right?

‘And if I do this thing right

I dream of our escape...’

George swallows, and lets the sound of guitar strums twine through his bloodstream. His eyes flutter shut. It all sounds *so similar* to Dream’s music— to the point where it *hurts*.

The phantom kiss of downy fingertips against skin echoes through his body, and he shudders.

Is this what he wants?

‘And we run

Until we break through...’

He doesn’t know. The concept of understanding his desires is so *untouchable* to him. He runs, because he doesn’t understand why his body fights him when all he *thinks* he wants to do is touch Dream.

‘If I get high enough...’

He runs, because everything is so *confusing*, and Dream is so *patient*. Because wants don’t necessarily equal needs, and maybe what George needs is separation.

‘If I get high enough...’

Maybe he needs to keep running.

So he does.

‘Will I see you again?’

George falls asleep that night with his cracked heart cradled in his palms, but he doesn’t hold it close to himself. Instead, he lets his elbows fall lax— lets the world see his bruised innards as a display, because maybe he still wants someone to see it.

Maybe he still wants what he doesn’t need.

Dream comes back late in the morning.

George is still sleeping— one hand dangling off the edge of his bed and the other fisting the fabric over his chest.

The sound of heavy rubber soles against their floor is one George hasn’t heard in a while. He realizes Dream’s footsteps have been light for a few weeks now. The reason as to *why* avoids him. But, now, they thunder across the room, startling George into half-awareness.

He blinks a few times.

Storm clouds and rain have fled, leaving sunlight in their wake. The day is bright and cheery— sky a heavenly blue and sunshine a pure gold.

The day is everything that isn’t rose petals on George’s lips. It’s everything that isn’t danger on his tongue and a hand around dripping sin. The weather makes it seem like none of it even happened. George doesn’t know if he’s grateful or frustrated because of it.

He can feel Dream’s stare on him.

A mixture of reluctance and anxiety swirls beneath his skin. The hand dangling off his mattress unconsciously spreads open.

When he finally looks up to meet Dream's gaze, he wishes he didn't.

He looks like hell.

Blond hair tousled and half-heartedly pulled back in a half-ponytail, as if to hide its messiness. Eyeliner smudged blurry beneath his lash line. Lips split and raw— like how they'd looked after he and George had—

No.

He steadies his breathing. Then he *notices*.

There's a bruise just below the line of his jaw.

George hadn't left that one.

The fist above his chest clenches tight, and the one outstretched begins to retract. Both hands are held close to himself as green bubbles dangerously in his throat.

It tickles his soft palette, and threatens to spill.

Dream speaks first, voice a sandpapery timbre— cracked almost as much as George's heart.

“Hi, Georgie.”

It's spoken like everything's fine. Like they hadn't taken ten steps forward only for George to pull the rug out from under them.

Like Dream hadn't left for an entire day to find some other mouth to occupy his skin. A mouth that probably isn't hesitant; a mouth that probably doesn't sob into his collar every time it tries to take a bite of what it's aching for.

A body that's confident enough to keep him warm without running away.

George sits up in his bed and rakes a hand through his hair— stifling a yawn. Feigning nonchalance is something he's getting too acquainted with.

"Hi," he murmurs back, reserved and monotone. "Where were you?"

George isn't stupid. He knows it's dumb of him to ask when he's clearly figured it out already. But he doesn't want Dream to know that he knows. So he watches as the man before him drops his book bag and rubs the back of his neck.

Click, click, click.

George feels irked by the sound of his tongue piercing. Where it used to be attractive, it now sounds like nails on chalkboard— like needles on bones.

"A friend's house," Dream says. "Hadn't seen him in a while, y'know? So I just— stayed the night, I guess." Forest green looks away, eyes focused on the floor as he unzips his boots. The action is almost *guilty*, with the haste he does it in.

But George just hums, not believing a single word.

And he has a right to.

Because it's then that he registers the stifling smell of weed and someone else's cologne in his nose. It settles musty and thick against the back of his throat. Stinging his sinuses, clogging his veins, shattering his heart, *more and more and more.*

Fuck.

George knew he shouldn't have let his heart lay so vulnerable like that. He should've kept it close, unreachable, so as to not damage it further.

So he lets himself go blank.

He picks up his phone, unplugs it, and remembers the text conversation he'd had yesterday— the promises he'd made to himself when he'd sent off those four words and received an affirmation back.

This is what he needs.

And he convinces himself it's okay like this.

So George gets out of bed and stretches, arms over his head. Dream stares at where his shirt rides up, and fire boils beneath his skin. He simmers it quickly— dousing it with anger and envy and betrayal until it sizzles out into glowing ash.

But it's obvious the flame can come back with the right treatment. If someone breathed a little air into it, the embers would jump right back into an inferno.

George tells himself it's put out for good.

He ignores the way Dream's eyes follow his movements— tracking his hands as they pull off his shirt and sleep shorts, honing in on the way he buckles his belt. George feels his skin crawl and prickle where green-gold falls.

The room is filled with an uneasy silence as he gets dressed. Not even the chirp of birds or hum of cicadas interrupt their own personal hell.

As if unbothered by the tension settling thick on his shoulders, George pulls on his nicest dress shirt and uncaps the neglected cologne on his desk. There's a creak of protest from the joints of Dream's chair as he leans back.

Brown avoids green, and George checks the time.

Twelve-thirty.

It's not quite the agreed-upon time of one-o'clock, but he decides to leave anyway. He can't think straight; not when Dream has hickeys on his neck from an unknown tongue and lips ruined red from someone else's teeth.

It *hurts*— everytime he looks at him.

And he doesn't want to remember why.

So George goes for the handle of the door, feet dragging and breathing shaky. Dream has been silent the entire time— observing in mute observation, face hardened and unreadable.

But, just before George's feet can pass the threshold of where torment ends and believed freedom begins— he speaks.

“Where are you going?”

George halts, eyes falling shut. His grip around the knob tightens, and he has half a mind to ignore the question.

Yet his body cements itself nonetheless while he sifts through the endless lies he could spew. A part of him wants to chew them all up and spit them out at Dream's feet— watch as he toes through his half-truths and imitated uncaringness, confused and bewildered.

Maybe he should match Dream's lie and say he's going to hang out with a friend. Maybe he should just not say anything; maybe he should leave Dream to wallow in the mess George won't acknowledge he started.

He does none of those things. The truth hurts sometimes, and something tells George this one will hurt more than any lie he could ever say.

So he's honest when his lips part.

“A date,” George responds, staring blankly at the opposite wall.

It’s as if he can *feel* Dream’s stare sharpen.

Swirls of smoky green-gold meld with the tossing envy in his chest, creating a cacophony of everything olive and emerald and lime.

Dream is making him see a new color, now, but it’s worse this time.

Where red is temptation and blissful hell and dark desire, green is contempt and jealousy and frustration. Green is primal— like peering into his animalistic side, hidden from prying hands and smothered by something more human.

Dream’s eyes are green. They hold everything George aches to know about him, secrets and mysteries waiting to be unraveled. But yellow smog conceals his true intentions. George is shut out, time and time again.

Curiosity is a disease, and neither Dream nor George are immune.

“A date,” Dream echoes, sounding distant and deep in thought. “With...?” He trails off.

George needs to complete his sentence. Needs to fit two jagged puzzle pieces together so it’ll click in that thick head Dream keeps sat upon his shoulders.

Bitterness blankets his tongue when the truth slips out again, because he knows it’ll hurt. Maybe he *wants* it to hurt.

Needs it to.

“With a girl.”

Immediate disappointment radiates off Dream in waves. It washes over George like the tide during a hurricane— sudden and overwhelming; drowning his senses and jamming his airway with liquid dismay.

He doesn't even have to look at Dream to know the expression he wears.

Every nerve in George's body still magnetizes itself in Dream's direction. They still scream to give into what he's most afraid of— to experience pain before he can experience pleasure.

But George believes he's too weak for that. It's time for him to abandon danger for safety.

"George..." The word leaves Dream's lips like a plea. It's choked out— drenched in regret and sorrow and *guilt*.

It almost makes George scoff. Because it's *his* decision. It's *his* decision to undo the progress he's made, to walk backwards from where Dream holds out his hand— palm supine and the perfect size to cradle George's split heart.

And yet, George runs backwards, tripping over heels and cracks in the pavement he's blind to. Because while his body retreats, his eyes stay trained in front of him.

On Dream.

And George hates himself for it.

"*Don't*," he warns, knowing Dream is preparing a speech for him. He likes to think he knows how Dream's brain works— how his *arrogant, thick, confident* brain works.

And it works by spilling his thoughts. By spewing every passionate belief that churns in that broad chest of his, mixing rationality with emotion so *well* that it nearly convinces George every time.

So George stops him before he's able to say a single word.

He doesn't want to be convinced anymore.

It seems to work. Dream has nothing left to say, and the tension and thick spite in the air leaves them both choking.

George doesn't look behind him when he slams the door shut.

She looks ethereal today.

Face sloped to mimic the goddesses and dress hugging her figure like a second skin— a leather jacket situated across her shoulders, shielding barren arms from the chill of late-autumn wind.

Her smile reflects the sunshine pooling through the window of the diner they're seated at.

Blond hair shimmers in a golden glow. Smile lines jump out with each giggle.

They play footsie under the table. George shoots her a teasing grin when she toes up the line of his calf, a mischievous glint reflecting in the sky-blue of her irises.

It's all talk and laughs and jokes— calm, cool, and *safe*. They work through their food slowly, both in no rush to leave their little slice of heaven.

He feels almost grateful that he'd written down the digits that'd been scrubbed off the skin of his arm.

And George thinks, in another lifetime, he could've fallen in love with her. A lifetime where things weren't as confusing; a lifetime where he's not hung up on some piercing-studded deviant. But the shame in his chest reminds him that this is not that lifetime.

For some reason, he still thinks he can do this.

He still thinks he can prove the universe— *Dream*— wrong; he can figure this out. He can let himself fall back into the ease of dating a girl who sings symphonies with her aura and not her guitar. Someone who's confident without poisoning George from the inside out with claws dipped in temptation and sin.

He can do this.

“George? You alright?”

Oh. He didn't realize he'd been quiet for so long.

It's ironic, because despite how hard he's trying, he still finds himself on a date, with just the person to solve his problems— zoning out because he's thinking of *him*.

“Yeah,” he breathes back. Her stare hardens with worry.

Pity. Stop pitying me, I'm fine. I'm fine, stop worrying about me, please, please—

“I'm fine!” George blurts, dismissively waving his hands in front of his face. “Just— spacing out, I guess. I've been having some— ” he pauses to choose his next words carefully, “—roommate issues, and I can't stop thinking about it for the life of me.” A few strained laughs escape his chest.

She pouts her lip in a way he should find endearing, and taps the side of his shin with the sole of her shoe.

“Okay. You can always talk to me, yeah?”

George nods. Acknowledged, but nothing more.

The pout morphs into a reassuring smile, and her palm falls on top of his hand where it lay on the

table. His breath catches as small, thin fingers trace over the ridges of his knuckles. George fights the urge to pull his hand away.

“Plus, I mean— I get it, I think,” she continues.

George raises an eyebrow. “You do?”

Another sunshiny smile. “Yeah. I’m not sure I could stand living with him either, if I’m honest.” A beat. George’s stomach sinks with confusion as she continues, “I mean— dealing with a roommate who sleeps around every night would irritate the shit out of me.”

The world pauses.

Anxiety swells up George’s throat, and he loses his appetite. The hand not on the table digs creases into his pants. Nails bite his thigh and ivory embeds itself into his cheek.

Because he’s never *once* told her about Dream.

Never.

“What are you— ” George struggles to grit the rest of his sentence out, “—what are you talking about?”

Her face expands in minute shock. “I’m sorry— are you *not* roommates with Dream? I could’ve sworn you were— maybe I misheard.” She looks away and thumbs over the back of his hand. It’s meant to be an apology, but the action makes his skin crawl, instead.

“N-No, I am. I just— how did you know that?”

“Oh,” she returns her gaze, flooded with relief, “he was talking about you a little while back. I have trig with him, and— um— ” She cuts herself off, eyes downcast.

George’s world is utterly colorblind, without Dream to show him red and green. But even *he* can

tell that her face is bright cherry, embarrassment upon her features and a nervous tick to the way her knee bounces up and down.

The tar pit in his stomach feels endless, because he thinks he knows why she's so red. And he really, *really* doesn't want to be right.

"Look, don't— don't hate me for this, but we sorta used to be a— uhm— a *thing*, two months ago," she spills, picking at a cracked edge of their wooden table.

"*Oh.*" It's hardly more than an exhale.

The realization hits him late. George feels like those painted nails of hers are scraping at the seams of his heart— engraving their name into the walls of his chest. Digging in and pulling pieces apart.

Blond strands swish as she shakes her head, like she's ridding of a memory. "It wasn't anything serious. I dunno— like, I guess I found him attractive, and we hooked up a few times. But I *promise* you that's all it was, George." She says it like he needs to be convinced that she and Dream are over— that she belongs to *George* now, and *only* him.

And that's what makes this so horrible.

Because while she thinks *George, George, George*, all he can think about is *Dream, Dream, Dream*. About how his petaled lips were on someone's body not his own. About how his heart belongs to everyone and no one— and how George's would fit so snug in his palm.

"It's— " his voice sounds grated, so he clears the flem at the back of his throat with a cough, "— it's fine, really. Don't worry about it."

She visibly relaxes. A soft smile curls glossed lips upwards. "That's good. He's a dick anyway; it's a wonder you've been able to stand him for so long."

His brows draw together.

Confusion knits the muscles of his face tight.

Dream is a lot of things— arrogant, hot-headed, mysterious: sure. But a *dick*?

George frowns.

Dream has always been aware of the people around him; he's needlessly kind-hearted and patient, soft around the edges and equipped with wheezy laughter that can pull at just about anyone's heartstrings. He hates coffee and loves the rain but is scared of thunder and lightning; he pulls his fringe into a ponytail because he's too stubborn to get it cut; he plays his guitar only when he has a reason to; he treats George like he's not something to be thrown away or tossed to the side, and—

God.

He feels his cheeks flush pink. His lips part before he can think about it anymore, “Did he— did he do something to you?”

And his date just laughs a bit. “No, no. He's a gentleman, I guess. Super charming, too, which is probably why he gets around so much,” she says. Her eyes flutter shut while she thinks. “But he's got— hm— *issues*? Like— relationship issues. We kind of had this agreement that we'd be a ‘friends with benefits’ type deal. It was alright for awhile, but he sorta got— ”

Her hand gestures vaguely. A grimace draws her brows inwards.

“He got *clingy*,” she eventually settles. George's eyes widen. “It was really sudden, and he kept asking if I wanted to go on dates with him. I really tried to make sure he knew I didn't want that, but he looked like a kicked puppy anytime I told him. Things just got *really* awkward.”

And, for some reason, George's heart constricts at this. Knots tighten; locks click shut. His hand fidgets in his lap.

“That doesn't— that doesn't sound necessarily *bad*, though,” George can't help but comment. He's fumbling, because he doesn't understand how wanting a relationship warrants ‘dick behavior’.

She raspberries, eyes narrowing.

“That’s the thing— it wouldn’t have been bad if that was it. But Dream is— well— *Dream*,” she points out. “I told him *once* that I didn’t want a relationship, and then he *never* talked to me again. I don’t know what his deal was. Like— I thought we were at least *friends*, but it took him a week to forget about me and fuck some guy who lived in my residence hall.”

Oh.

George swallows, sharp and acute. It’s like he can’t process anything, at the moment. Everything feels much too overwhelming.

Is Dream really that heartless?

“But here’s the crazy part.”

At the sound of her voice, George snaps himself out of the haze he’d fallen into. *There’s more?*

“The guy he was sleeping with was a mutual friend of mine, and— *get this*— they cut everything off because, well— ” she pauses to laugh. George doesn’t reciprocate. “He said someone else’s *name*, George. While they were— *y’know*.”

Her giggles swarm the atmosphere, contagious and delicate.

It’s a direct contrast to how George’s world shakes.

He doesn’t find it funny. He just feels *hollow*.

Because he *remembers*.

The memory of Dream’s jasmine voice fades into clarity, and he’s suddenly thrown back in time— to warmer weather when leaves still clung to branches. To secondhand smoke twirling about his neck— Dream’s jacket on his shoulders and cigarette butts speckled beneath heels and war-torn bodies.

“I said something I didn’t mean to say to my—my date tonight.”

Even in memory, Dream’s voice is laden with addiction. It draws George in; it splices him up into smaller and smaller pieces, grounding him to dust.

The flicker of a flame flashes behind George’s eyes. An inhale, an exhale. Phantom cannabis and smog stings his eyes.

“It was... embarrassing. But also really, really shitty of me. I’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

Then, George hears his own voice. It’s timid—hushed and breathy. *“Do you know why you keep messing things up?”*

A pause. The echo of silver against pearl teeth—once, twice, *three* times. A soft smile.

“Yeah, I do. But I don’t think I can stop.”

George’s chest constricts even further, if possible.

He doesn’t know what to think. Dream had seemed so unequivocally *open* that day—so willing to spill his soul to a broken one in need of repair. So painfully, brutally *honest* that it hurt to listen to.

It’s nearly impossible to paint the persona that this girl describes upon Dream’s features—his *mannerisms*. Dream, who breathed life into him when he couldn’t inhale without choking on tears. Dream, who offered rosey smiles and vanilla lattes and Asiago bagels each morning.

Dream, who *waited*. Who was *patient* and *kind* and *respectful*, even when George was everything but.

His date must be mistaken. *Must be.*

Because that's just not who Dream is.

Right?

George frowns.

He doesn't know.

Maybe he really *doesn't* understand anything, anymore.

"Hey," she says, voice fuzzy in George's ears. "I'm sorry— I didn't mean to make you upset. We can stop talking about him, if you want."

His face must've fallen— downcast, perplexed, and sorrowful— for her to notice. So he schools his appearance with haste, and tacks on an imperfect smile.

"It's alright. And yeah— let's talk about something else."

So they do. For a *while*.

The rest of the night is nice.

It's nothing perfect, and it's nothing pretty.

George's mind keeps fleeing to a face he should be forgetting. But his date just hooks their elbows as they walk through the north quad of campus, admiring the frisbee players scattered about the length of it.

They laugh, they talk, they smile.

She's wonderful— a beacon of sun and the glimmering of dewdrops. Clean and fresh and *safe*. So,

so, safe. George walks with her— blind. Because his eyes are still locked on green-gold behind his lids.

It makes guilt gather somewhere in his core. But he ignores it.

He needs to.

They spend the day together, mindlessly, until dusk falls overhead. Street lamps flicker on, bathing concrete and cracked pavement in a soft yellow.

He walks her home, bodies sidled together to conserve warmth; they can see their breath vapor swirl above them.

George huffs, and tries not to breathe when it reminds him of smoke.

She lives in a small townhouse just outside campus— small and homey, painted a lovely cream color. The lights make it seem as if the bricks are glowing. They come to a halt at the foot of her steps, unhooking arms and grinning foolishly at one another.

She's foolish for falling for him.

George is foolish for thinking he could do this.

And he isn't stupid. *He's not.*

He knows what she wants. It's evident in the way the world's gone silent— in the way her baby blue eyes flicker down, then up: *expectant*. She's setting palms along his shoulders, smelling of comfort and fresh wine. Her painted lips are parting, and she's leaning forward.

Nausea makes his blood pressure spike. So he doesn't breathe. He just lets her take what she wants, slipping his lids shut to dream about anything but *here and now*.

The moment her mouth meets his, George knows he was wrong.

Because he can't do this.

It's embarrassing—*just* how much tension threads through his muscles when her tongue parts his lips to taste his teeth. His brows draw together. He fights down the anxiety and frustration—the green and red storm battling beneath his skin.

George turns on autopilot, kissing her robotically with little tongue and spit. The taste in his mouth is stale and bittersweet.

She laps it up like a starved woman.

There's so much *passion* behind her lips, and George's heart splinters further. Because he can't muster anything besides the droning shuffle of his jaw— up, down... up, down.

Waxy lipstick. In his mouth, on his jaw, in the crease of his neck.

She bites, licks, *sucks*— decorates the column of his throat in marks he'd forbeyed Dream to leave. Her teeth are blunter than his. Her tongue lacks glinting jewelry. Her fingers are small and naked.

George copes.

He recalls the slimness of Dream's waist between his palms, when George lays his hands upon her hips. He replaces the murky aftertaste on his tongue with sin, danger, and poison— with smoke and windswept rainfall.

George thinks about the noises Dream made when he'd touched him. About low, *pretty*, pretty moans and silky whines. About heavy panting with silver glimmering in the corner of his eye. About velvety, flushed skin with pumping blood underneath, twitching and foreign in his palm.

Humiliation feels blinding when his pants get tighter.

George thinks he needs this. He thinks he needs a girl like this one— glassy-eyed and possessive

and *stable*.

But George wants Dream.

Wants and needs are different. Needs should outweigh wants.

And George still fucking wants Dream. So, *so* bad.

He lets an unintentional groan escape his throat when she worries a patch of skin between her teeth and palms him through straining fabric.

“Do you wanna come inside?” she whispers, giggly and airy. Playful, lighthearted, and oblivious.

Culpable shame chases any sort of pleasure from the muddled innards of his brain. George exhales, expelling all the clean air and sunshine he’d inhaled today. He knows he can’t survive off of it. His cells feed from the fumes of tempests and smoldering joints. From ash and toxins and everything bad for him.

And it’s here, with a perfect girl’s lips on his neck and an opportunity for salvation delivered to him on a silver platter, that he realizes.

Maybe what he wants is what he needs.

So he pulls away.

He wills his blood to disperse to other parts of his body and grips her shoulders to gain distance. She blinks up at him, confused, when he offers a small shake of his head.

“I can’t stay. I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Consolingly, he thumbs across the swell of her cheek, soft and blemish-free.

“Oh,” she murmurs back. But there’s no betrayal in her eyes. No anger or frustration. Because George is a coward, and she thinks there’ll be another chance, even when he knows there can’t be. “Okay.”

A sheepish smile gleams up at George. He musters a sad one back. Dull and aching.

“Thanks for tonight. You’re so sweet, you know? Cute, too.” She says this with endearment in her tone. But it’s nothing like Dream’s endearment— so saturated and sugared. Hers is bitter, because George feels *guilty*. “Text me when you get back, please?”

“Of course,” he lies. Fake promises, fake kisses, fake smiles. He presses his lips to the corner of her mouth.

A silent apology.

She tries to meet him halfway, but George steps back before she can. *Hiding. Avoiding.*

They part ways, and she waves at him from her doorstep before disappearing inside. George treks back to his residence hall, heart heavy and tongue stewing in lingering staleness and bittersweet words.

He pauses on the side of the street. A shaky hand pulls his phone from the back pocket of his pants. Sweat coats his palm, leaving a humid trail on the luminescent screen when he swipes to his contacts.

His eyes turn to the towering building of his residence hall as he hovers over the button. A deep breath. Knives and razors in his throat.

And then... *relief*. His thumb presses down.

George deletes her number.

Truly, he has no idea what to expect when he enters their dorm.

George could be met with anger, or with betrayal, or with avoidance. He could be met with nothing at all; a barren room and knowledge that Dream is occupying another bed somewhere far from the bite of George's tongue.

He steels himself for just that— clammy hand fisted about the handle. The metal goes slick with condensation.

Shoulders tense. Toes curl in his shoes.

He opens the door slowly. Trepidation fuels his hesitance, biting the meaty part of his cheek and breathing unsteadily.

But the scene before him is nothing he could've predicted. His eyes widen, jaw going slack.

The soles of his shoes feel rooted to the entryway, when his eyes fall upon Dream's side of the room. His heart seizes up.

He's sat in bed, torso propped against the headboard. The column of his throat draws George's gaze in— arched delicately, exposed and speckled in stubble as his head tilts back to rest on the wall behind him. Oakwood lashes conceal his eyes, brows drawn inward. Like he's concentrating — like he's *pained*.

George's spit thickens when he realizes Dream is shirtless. Freckles and day-old hickeys on display. Chest rising and falling with each breath.

Sweatpants hang dangerously low on his hips, ankles crossed over one another and legs splayed in front of him.

His guitar is sat in his lap. Two corded hands cradle its neck and thumb across its strings.

Cannabis floods George's senses. He inhales— *deep*.

There's a joint dangling between Dream's teeth. Smog from smoke that'd caressed the insides of his lungs dances near the ceiling, and it enters George's windpipe. Those same vapors memorize his lungs, too.

Melodic chords, sugar-coated and lovely, sound rich in his ears— just like all of Dream's music.

But George frowns.

The song is melancholy, today.

Steeped in watered-down tea, laden in rain that smells like decay. Pessimistic and dreary.

Why does this hurt so much?

George's eyes go blurry with unshed tears.

"Dream," he croaks.

The music halts. There's no drawn-out strum or lingering, poignant vibration. It's cut off— abrupt and harsh.

Dream's eyes shoot open. Surprise oozes from green-gold when they lock onto George's beaten and bruised figure.

A hand drifts away from his guitar to remove the joint from cracked lips. Ash sprinkles onto the bedspread like snow during winter.

"George...?"

It's a quiet, *quiet* utterance of his name. But it's so, *so* lovely.

George feels his heart melt— some pieces melding into one. His shoulders quiver with released tension as the first tears of the night begin to fall. They collect at his chin, splattering on the floor about his feet.

Those same feet kick off his shoes and carry him blindly towards his magnetized addiction, pausing at the side of Dream's bed. He hiccups, fingers gripping the hem of his dress shirt. It wrinkles when he *clenches*. Wet eyes look up at Dream, desperate and broken.

His breathing goes all weird when he's met with a contemplative, hard stare.

George gulps. "Do you— do you *hate me?*"

His voice pathetically breaks. Another sob wracks through his body. He shoves the heels of his palms in his eye sockets. Sunspots gather in the void behind his eyes. Green and red tinge the edges.

The room is deathly silent.

George is so, *so* scared.

He's terrified that he's made Dream hate him. That he's so disposable and broken that there's nothing left to salvage.

God.

George hates *himself*.

There's a sigh from above him.

And then, there are ringed fingers, hot as irons, around each his wrists. They gently remove George's hands from his eyes. A soft thumb traces along the apex of both cheeks, tilting his face upwards.

Dream looks down on him with a sad smile. George's breath hitches, when he sees tears build at the blond's lash line, too. He's not wearing eyeliner, today.

"I could never hate you, Georgie," he murmurs.

Relief coaxes George's muscles to go lax, somewhat. His body vibrates with a want— *a need*— to be closer. To feel the warmth of Dream's chest against his. To do what he abandoned an angel for.

"Can I— " George sucks in a breath, "can I come up? With— with you."

All it takes is a nod, and George finds himself kneeling next to Dream's body, feet dangling off the side. His shins dip into the mattress. Restless hands fidget in his lap, picking at the threads of his pants.

Dream sets his guitar to the side, joint precariously hanging between two knuckles.

"I didn't think I was gonna see you again tonight," Dream admits, bringing rolled paper between his lips to take a hit. He exhales to the side, towards the wall to avoid George— a courteous gesture.

He almost wishes Dream had blown it in his direction. Just to feel the *burn*— the saturation of a high, dwelling in his bloodstream.

"Are you allowed to smoke in here?"

It's a dumb question. *Intentional*.

Anything to steer them away from seriousness. Anything to steer them away from their faults—their *mistakes*.

Dream scoffs. “Of course not. Just— didn’t feel like seeing the sky today. So I stayed in here.” He pauses to smirk. Cocky— in all the ways George foolishly admires. “D’you wanna share?”

George breaks their eye contact as he considers. His arms twitch, wanting to reach out and *touch*. Feel. Breathe.

Doubt creeps through his veins.

This feels too easy.

Like they’re ignoring the stifling weight overhead; like they’re refusing to acknowledge the hurt they’ve caused one another. The words left unsaid are bringing the atmosphere to a boil, and George’s skin begins to welt.

It feels sudden, when another wet lump wells up his throat. His knees shuffle forward until they bump Dream’s thigh, tears staining sweatpants an inky black where they land.

“George— what are you— ” Dream starts. But it takes little time for his eyes to light up in recognition, sentence trailing off quietly into nothingness.

There are no protests, as George inches closer, and closer, and *closer*.

So one leg swings over Dream’s lap, and he practically collapses into his chest.

Warm.

His nose presses into the crux of Dream’s neck, inhaling needs, wants, and everything else. Tears fall hotly upon his shoulder. George’s arms wrap tight under Dream’s, fingers digging into the sculpted muscle at his back.

And he just *holds* him. As if he may disappear. As if he may slip through the cracks in George’s heart and drift away with the wind’s pull.

“I’m sorry,” George manages, words breathed into freckled skin.

“Why are you sorry?”

George feels the vibration of Dream’s vocals traverse through his chest.

They’re so close.

“I don’t know. Feel bad.”

The rumble of a contemplative hum sounds through the air. George’s nails dig into fiery skin—steadfast.

“It’s okay, princess,” Dream sighs. A few fingers trace up the side of George’s neck. They linger around a few spots, pausing, then *pressing*.

It aches where he touches.

Then, George remembers. Remembers her mouth on his throat— sucking and teething and *marking him*.

Dream must’ve seen them— the bruises she left.

He feels more liquid regret blind his vision.

Dream’s free arm tugs George flush against him. Possessive, almost.

“Did you— ?” the blond’s sentence gets cut off, voice dying out halfway through.

The unsaid question crackles like lightning just above George's head; it torments him.

Did you fuck her?

The mere *thought* revolts him, even when he knows it shouldn't. He holds on a little tighter. His thighs tense around Dream's waist— clinging closer, *closer*.

He doesn't know if it'll ever be enough.

"No," he whispers, defensive— *ashamed*. "I couldn't, Dream. I— I *couldn't*— " The sentence dissolves into another hiccup.

The strung-tight limbs beneath George's touch fall loose almost at once. It's as if he can *taste* Dream's relief.

Why is he relieved?

Doubt echoes again, like a ricocheting bullet inside his skull. So he speaks that very doubt into existence.

"Why did you forget about me so easily?"

His voice sounds so unintentionally *dejected*.

Just like that, Dream's muscles go rigid again. His exhale stutters in the chest pressed against George's.

"I didn't," Dream breathes in his ear. It feels like a lie.

George leans back, red-rimmed eyes staring bullet holes into ones that look uncharacteristically *shameful*. "Then why did you— " he sputters through his sentence, syllables trembling with betrayal he doesn't have a right to feel. "Why did you leave and— and *fuck* someone right after we — "

He stops to breathe, teeth gnawing at his swollen lip. The silence in the room feels deafening in the absence of his voice. “It was my— my first time doing that with a g-guy. And you made me feel so... *special*. But then you can go off and do the same fucking thing with s-someone else right after when I was still *confused* and I just— I don’t *understand*, Dream.”

Dream’s eyes swim with something unreadable. There’s understanding, guilt, frustration. There’s *so much*. So his expression flatlines, as if to compensate for the torrent of emotion in his gaze.

“George, I didn’t fuck *anyone*, okay? I was— I was afraid I misinterpreted something, or that I fucked shit up with you, and I was— ” A groan tears from his chest. His forehead drops to George’s shoulder, the thumb at his waist tracing little circles into fabric. “I was *desperate*, alright? So, *yes*, I let someone... *touch* me. But we *didn’t* have sex. It was just making out and smoking and stuff, I *promise* you.”

Promises.

George’s lips purse as he mulls over his words. He thinks back to the conversations he’d had with his date tonight, and there are just so many *contradictions*— so many unanswered questions and inquiries George should be asking.

But he comes up dry.

“Then why didn’t you come home?” is the only thing he manages to ask. His words are taut and stretched thin.

Dream presses a kiss to George’s collar— so fleeting and delicate it almost goes undetected.

“I didn’t think you wanted to see me.”

Oh.

A slow buzz hums like the electricity of a livewire beneath his surface. Warmth floods his heart.

Never before has Dream sounded so *timid*— so *unsure*. George shakily breathes out. His finger pads engrain the bumps of Dream's spine into their memory— slow and tantalizing as they trace.

“M sorry, Georgie,” he mumbles. Jasmine settles at the back of George's throat.

It tastes sweet.

He pushes their chests apart to look Dream in the eyes. Adrenaline races like an addictive drug through his bloodstream— heartbeat thundering in his ears and nerves set alight.

Moonlight has never looked as ethereal as it does now. It dances upon Dream's piercings, and bounds off the highs of his cheekbones. It catches on each fleck of stubble, each laugh line and each imperfection.

It makes him look so... *human*. So tangible.

George takes a shuddering breath.

“Make it up to me,” he whispers.

Dream blinks back at him, subtle shock in the greens of his irises.

It's odd— the amount of unprecedented boldness he feels right now. He's afraid it may leave him, as quick as it came, so he grasps onto it— pulls it tight to his body and refuses to let it go.

He feels strangely ready. Ready to spill what's driven him over the edge. Ready to sing to the man of his desires the truth to his feelings.

For once, he doesn't feel the need to hide.

It's *exhilarating*.

“I don’t know a lot of things right now, Dream. I really, *really* don’t,” George says. And it’s true. *He doesn’t*. But he brings a palm up, up, to splay along the flat expanse of Dream’s chest. The heart beneath it rabbits under his touch. Humming bird wings flutter somewhere in his stomach. “But— but I— ”

In the end, he’s still somewhat cowardly. *A fool*.

He can’t look at Dream while he says it. *He can’t*.

So his eyes pinch shut, fingers gripping *painfully* into Dream’s skin.

“I— I *want* you. I know I do. I want you s-so much it *hurts*, so just— ” he feels Dream’s free hand *squeeze*, “— *touch* me; I don’t care anymore. I just— I want to be taken care of for once. *Please*.”

When his eyes open, Dream is staring at him like he’s hung the stars. Awe sparkles in blown-out pupils, lips parted— unblinking.

The glinting reflection of his piercings seem blinding. They shine, shimmer, and draw George in, just as they had the first day he’d moved in.

“Can I kiss you, then?” Dream asks, hushed— as if the words might scare George off.

And there’s no hesitation, this time, when he nods back.

Dream smiles something soft, and brings the joint back to his lips.

All George can do is *watch*, as he inhales with half-lidded eyes, scarlet dripping from the rose petals of his lips. It lands in their laps and swirls like a hurricane— brewing, *churning*.

George feels drunk off his eyes alone. Intense, and so, *so* pretty.

Paper leaves the line of Dream’s mouth, but smoke doesn’t make a reappearance. Instead, a ring-heavy hand cups George’s nape, fingers playing with the curled ends of brown hair— *peach fuzz*.

Dream leans forward.

George does, too— like Dream is an invisible force, pulling his strings.

His heart feels like it may burst.

Then, they're kissing.

Lips pressed together— heads tilting.

It's only his second time kissing Dream, but it feels just as euphoric as the first. It's nerve-shattering, intimate, and *perfect*.

Dream still tastes like sunlight.

Under the storm clouds and rain, a patch of heaven splits through. It rekindles the flame that'd been snuffed out just days before; Dream breathes life back into it, until it licks at his limbs and sheaths him whole.

All-consuming.

Rose petals bloom and part against one another.

And then Dream is exhaling into another set of lungs, spilling red and smoke down George's throat until it clogs his clarity. Cannabis, heady and intoxicating, seeps into his bone marrow and replaces the oxygen in his cells.

The feeling is enough to draw a moan from somewhere in his core.

Molten gold drips to George's navel and swirls with the red from Dream's lips, churning up residual sunlight and everything cherry-tinted. A metallic tang coats his tongue. He presses it into

Dream's mouth and urges him to taste it as well— swapping inhaled, exhaled smoke; back and forth, back and forth.

George lets the drug sink deeper— *deeper*.

They part, if only enough for Dream to take another hit between them. Embers at the tip of the joint flare up, tossing hellish light upon the planes of their faces.

His breathing is labored, as George watches Dream inhale and *hold*.

It's barely another second before their mouths crash back together. George's nails tear into Dream's skin, making him feel the claws that'd dug a home in his shoulders for weeks upon weeks.

A muffled noise leaves Dream's throat and enters George's. He swallows down the air, the smoke, the *sin*, that Dream offers him. Sucks it down like a madman— *thrives* off it. His mind goes all muddled— swamped by nothing and everything, by *red* and *Dream* and *smoke* and *sun*.

George doesn't know when he'd gotten pinned to the mattress. He doesn't remember losing his shirt, his socks, his pants.

But he remembers Dream's eyes.

The way they'd glowed as each clothing item fell to the floor, face lighting up like he was unwrapping a gift.

Stale ash taints the inside of his nose. The joint lay smothered and forgotten on the nightstand.

Dream decorates his neck with his teeth, ghosting the silver shot through his tongue along the length of his collarbone. He marks him like he's trying to undo the damage done by another mouth.

Like he's replacing the lingering remnants of his fading heterosexuality with blistering *wrongfulness*.

With the branding of another man.

It's so, *so* wrong. But also so *achingly* right.

He's hard against his briefs— a drug in his capillaries and need behind his eyes.

Dream's sweatpants join the abandoned clothes at the foot of his bed, both men now clad in underwear and a sheen of sweat.

And as George looks up, he knows this is how everything was supposed to be.

There is no alternate universe where he would've ended up in a girl's bed tonight. There is no alternate universe where he's not *here*, neck-deep in a calm red sea with a man sitting so pretty on his thighs— boyish and *masculine* and everything George sought to avoid.

There's still disgust somewhere in his chest.

There's still frustration and hatred and *green*, but George doesn't let it overtake him, this time. Instead, he runs palms along the smallness of Dream's waist, letting everything unholy sear trails into his skin.

It *burns*— sweltering bliss.

"Go slow," George whispers.

The hands on either side of his head clench in the sheets.

Dream smiles, moonlight rebounding off the angular profile of his face. "Of course, princess."

Rings are abandoned on the nightstand alongside the sizzling joint. They *clink* and *clatter* in a heap.

Everything Dream does is gentle.

His tongue, his hands, his words; they all coax George's fears into desires. He kisses down his sternum and drags fingertips along the jut of his hip bones, memorizing slow and easy.

A gasp spills from his tongue in carmine sweetness when Dream's mouth presses to the dip of his belly. His muscles seize and ripple, hand flying down to fist in golden hair. Every part of him is so *fucking* sensitive, and Dream knows just where to touch— just where he needs to press to get George to *tick*.

Dream looks up at him through long, *long* lashes, when he reaches the hem of his underwear. A kiss plants itself on its seam, and George's legs press together involuntarily.

He's been sucked off before. By gorgeous girls in miniskirts and his exs in his clothes— by glossed lips with long hair brushing his thighs and high-pitched noises from upturned noses.

But *this*— this is *Dream*.

Dream, who's looking at him like a starved man, with glitter in his eyes and a fire to his skin. Stubble along his jaw and a squareness to his face. A heavy brow bone and low vocals.

"I— " George's words get caught in his throat. "I don't think I can look at you, if you do that."

There's no sound of protest. Just a grin and two fingers snapping elastic against George's navel. "If I do *what*, Georgie?"

Red blisters across his cheeks. "If you— if you use your mouth. It's just— it's still too much. I think I'll freak out on you if I watch."

Dream's face softens. A reassuring look crosses through his eyes, and he smiles. George falters when he thinks he sees something dark and vaguely sad flash there, too. But it's gone as soon as he blinks.

“That’s okay. Just— look at the ceiling. I’ll make you feel good, princess.”

So George lets his gaze float skywards, landing upon the void of blackness above him. He finds solace in it— *comfort*. Whether it’s because it serves as a new way to avoid confrontation, or whether it just soothes the anxious part of his soul, George doesn't care.

Because his nails dig into Dream’s scalp, *pressing*, when something *warm* and *wet* mouths over the tent in his briefs.

A small, rattling moan slips from his throat. He doesn’t think he’s ever sounded so... *needy*.

When Dream slips his last shred of fabric dignity down the length of his thighs, his calves, his ankles; he does it with such painful *sincerity*. With kisses to the inside of both knees, with whispers of encouragement and praise.

Each word echoes in George’s ears as he blinks back tears and stares half-lidded at the ceiling.

It’s so *good*.

And when Dream gets his mouth on him, George absolutely *shatters*. The cracks of his heart feel like they’ve had a lighter taken to them— pieces melting and mixing to solidify into something larger.

He relies on touch, feel, and sound.

The tickle of soft hair and rough stubble against his inner thighs. The sound of slick spit— trailing deltas of molten lava between his legs. The downy pads of fingers tracing mindless patterns along his sides, his chest, his legs. George is quivering— one hand threaded in Dream’s hair and the other digging trenches into his ribs. He *grips*, because he’s afraid he might lose himself already.

Gold in his belly feels as though it may burst prematurely, with how Dream’s piercing feels against him. He digs it just beneath the crown, then dips it into the slit; it’s a cool contrast to the intense hotness of breath and tongue.

Chilled against warm. Winter against summer. Opposites in nature, fitting together like a puzzle piece.

George has never felt this good before.

“*Fuck...*” he murmurs to the endless dark expanse above him. He wishes he could direct it to the source— to the man who’s making his toes curl and his vision go white.

But it’s *scary*.

Because his mind knows that it’s easier to deny and forget if he doesn’t have any visuals attached.

He’s close already.

Dream’s lips are cinched and *tight* where they drag, and yet his hands are so *wary*— so tender and lovely along his skin and his freckles; along each ridge and each bump. His hips jerk once, twice. A helpless, drawn-out whine flees the clutches of his chest.

Dream is fucking *good* at this.

George doesn’t want to remember why.

He feels Dream pull off, and a hand replaces the mouth that’d been there moments ago. Rose petals leave their imprint where he flushes cherry red at his tip. George goes even pinker in his cheeks. It doesn’t help that Dream’s palm is so *warm*— so large and slick and *perfect*. It pumps him leisurely, but still manages to feel like too much.

“Close,” he chokes out, breathy and desperate.

His eyes pinch shut. Embarrassment courses through his veins when he can’t control the twitches of his muscles or the way he humps into the curl of Dream’s hand. It’s sporadic— rutting up faster, *faster*, when Dream slows down even further.

“God, George. I meant it, you know?”

Dream’s voice sounds like it’s being breathed into his ear. So George’s eyes blearily open to see the man’s own face, sweaty and pained and so, *so* in awe, hovering above his own.

“You’re so fucking pretty,” Dream breathes out.

George watches his lips cradle each word. And although he’s shaking, and tears are tracking salt-stains down his temples, he *knows*.

The world may be hazy, and his ears might be waterlogged from the *pitter-patter* of Dream’s rainfall, but it feels so *obvious*, all of a sudden.

He knows what he wants.

“With me,” George pleads. The words come out easily. “With me, *please*, Dream.”

His hands fall to Dream’s hips, yanking the hem of his boxers as far down his thighs as they’ll go. There’s a sharp inhale from above him, then they join the heap on the floor. And because looking into the endless greens of Dream’s eyes still seems overwhelming, George throws both arms around his neck to bury his face in its crease. He inhales— smoke, storm burst, and sweetness without a hint of anything bitter.

Legs latch around the narrow of Dream’s hips when he falls flush against George. Chest to chest, heart to heart. They beat rapidly together— in sync.

Dream’s nose digs just below George’s ear. Hot breath falls against already-damp skin; he’s panting again.

The muscles of George’s stomach contract and twitch when Dream hooks his left arm under the lumbar of his back, hoisting two pairs of slim hips together— skin on skin, buzzing with nerves and pink, pink, pink.

Red, red, red.

George lets himself cry into the slope of Dream's shoulder when he takes them both into his right palm. Quiet shushes and moans fill the emptiness of his skull. They bounce around like a forbidden melody— repeating and repeating and *repeating*.

The broadness of Dream's hand around them both is *indescribable*.

Where George has only been touched by his own slim fingers and those belonging to dainty women, Dream makes it his own; he *takes it*. He molds it into something new— this *desire*, this unearthly attractiveness of being *smaller* than his partner.

George fucking *adores* it.

Feeling so pliant, malleable, and *tiny* under someone else. Letting *them* paint his skin blues and purples and tower above him— giving pleasure upon pleasure and everything else he's unknowingly longed for.

Dream's cock is hard and heavy against his own, hips jolting at each tremble of George's limbs.

The elbows strung around Dream's neck pull taut. George tastes the salt of sweat on his tongue when his jaw falls open, mouthing along the junction between collarbone and throat to stifle any embarrassing noises.

Dream breathes out a low moan, the rhythm of his fist faltering. "*God—* you're so good, sweetheart."

Oh, *fuck*.

"*Dream...*" is all George can manage, because *the nickname*.

The *fucking* nickname.

George has been called 'babe' before.

He's been called 'love', and 'baby', and 'hun'. But the labels of '*princess*' and '*sweetheart*' are something so utterly *new*.

Because while he's called his exes those same words before, *never* have they been directed at *him*. And, somehow, Dream makes it feel so achingly *right*.

It makes him want to be called '*pretty*' and '*sweetheart*' and '*princess*' forever.

Delirious, high on lust and secondhand smoke, George lets it be known.

"Call me that again," he whispers, voice shattered. The vocals disperse into honeycomb hair and the devil's wings.

The knot in George's belly tightens.

Dream's fist flies, faster, and faster, and *faster*.

"*Sweetheart*," he says, barely a rumble— a *vibration* between their chests. "So lovely, honey; you feel so good."

God.

A sob flies off George's tongue.

Fear is chased away by *Dream, Dream, Dream*— his hand, his thunder and his rain, his piercings and sundrop mouth.

They hold each other— George clawing into Dream's shoulders and Dream burying his face into a nest of ruffled, chocolate hair. Opposing lungs inhale smoke and sex and intimacy.

And when George cums, it's like nothing he's experienced before.

It's stardust and vanilla; it's polished silver and hellfire; it's a calm, sweeping storm with Dream standing in its eye. It's all honeydew and wet concrete— an inferno that swells from the tip of a lit cigarette.

Ash coats his teeth. Charcoal mixes with the brown hue of his eyes.

The rope tethering his core to his humanity *snaps*. And it snaps *violently*.

Ends split, threads fray.

George loses sight of pale blue and baby-soft feathers and sunlit halos and long, blond hair.

All he sees is red.

He can't feel the tips of his fingers or the tears on his cheeks. Everything's gone fuzzy— eyes squeezed shut and head stuffed with the plume of dark gray clouds.

Dream is saying things to him, but all he can register is the beating of blood in his ears and the dwindling cortisol fleeing his system.

He feels... *wrong*.

Iffy.

Like there's something amiss.

There's a strange ache to his heart that wasn't there before— a throbbing in his brain and an emptiness where his soul had once sat full. It's a bit of bleary sadness and loss.

George doesn't even realize he's having another panic attack until Dream sits him upright in his lap.

They're both painted white up to their necks, and George can't breathe. Dream's skin is under his nails, and the world is going dark. There are hickeys petaling his hip bones, and George is *crying*.

Fat tears scorch where they land. He's letting out gross, wet-sounding sobs that shake his ribs and shoulders. He's gasping and sputtering and drooling down his chin.

And yet, Dream doesn't budge.

He lets George go through what he needs to— helping him through it with no protest.

Dream's hand feels so perfect, soothing along the expanse of his back— rubbing little circles into his shoulder blades and the knobs of his spine. The other is messied, awkwardly held out to the side as it drips with the climax of George's needs and wants.

"It f-felt so *good*— " he hiccups his way through a sentence he didn't mean to say aloud.

And Dream shushes him gently, with little whispers of "*I know*" and subtle caresses. "Shh, you're alright," he promises. "I've got you, b— princess."

If George weren't fighting his airway for clearance, he might've questioned the stutter to Dream's words. But, here he is, crying into another man's shoulder all because he made him feel the most pleasure he's ever felt— *ever*.

And although his body fights him for wanting what he wants, he's still able to come down. To reenter the world he's stepped foot in. To *breathe*.

Finally.

He feels new.

George's full-body spasms eventually teeter out into a light quiver. His toes uncurl, muscles unwinding.

Dream sits and *holds* him. So softly, so *prettily*.

“Dream...?” George croaks. His voice is *shredded*.

The blond hums back, low and gritty. “Hm?”

George swallows smoothly.

Honey and cream.

“Is it— is it supposed to feel like— like everything’s wrong? But... sort of like it’s meant to be that way?”

Dream is silent for a moment as he considers. His cheek mashes against George’s shoulder. “I don’t think you’re supposed to understand how you feel about everything right now. First time I did anything with a guy I think I just felt... *different*,” he breathes that last word out, airy and drenched in sincerity. “It was like I was a new person, almost. But—like—I didn’t understand the body I was in yet, y’know? Like my feet were fuckin’ backwards or something. It’s kinda like relearning how to live.”

George exhales.

His lashes are clumped when they flutter open. He stares at the opposite wall, swathed in midnight darkness and dancing shadow.

A fingertip traces patterns into Dream’s back. “Did it feel... normal? The new body— I mean. Was it the right fit?”

There’s a short laugh that falls hot against George’s ear.

“I don’t think I’d be here with you if it wasn’t, princess.”

His face still manages to fill with more blood, somehow. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” It’s like George can *feel* the smirk on his skin.

“Call me names.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“*No*,” George immediately replies. “I never said that.”

A kiss is left at the base of his throat. “I call you what you are, is all.”

Laughter bubbles up George’s throat, sparse and strained.

“You’re an idiot,” he teases, lighthearted in a way they’ve never been. “‘M not a princess.” His forehead digs into the warmth of muscle beneath his face.

There’s a beat of silence. Dream’s breathing gets shallower.

“I like it when you laugh,” he murmurs, hushed like it’s a secret.

Oh.

“You still didn’t answer my question.” George says this with a chest full of butterfly wings and mouth dribbling with honey. He shifts in Dream’s lap to press their bodies closer. The mess between them smears and dries—horribly uncomfortable.

And yet neither make a move to clean it up.

“I think,” Dream pauses to inhale, “we should go to sleep.”

“Well *I* think you should answer my question.”

“*Hey*,” Dream pulls back to look George in the eye. Both men grimace as skin on skin stickily pulls apart. “I don’t think you should be talking like that to the guy who just made you cum the hardest you ever have in your *life*.”

Dull indignance flares up George’s tongue. “That wasn’t— you didn’t— ” he pauses his stuttering to groan. “Your ego is so annoying.”

There’s a few more laughs. It’s strangely tranquil— like the calm stillness after a hurricane, leaves sodden and plastered to the pavement.

George doesn’t know what morning will bring.

Where last time he felt anxious and pessimistic about waking up with the memories of the night prior, he now feels blindly prepared. He feels like he’s going to wake up with Dream at his side— warm comforter and zero regrets. With content blanketing his limbs and rain against the window.

“Can I stay here tonight?” George asks. His eyes droop with heavy exhaustion, red rimmed lids threatening to fall shut.

“Of course,” Dream murmurs with a kiss to his temple, “*sweetheart*.”

With a scoff, George shoves their bodies apart. “*Stop*.”

“I don’t think I will. Sorry, Georgie.”

With enough distance, Dream’s flushed features are on full display. His lip ring has been jostled and tilted to the side, pink rose petals tinted a raw carmine from biting and kissing. There’s a bite mark on his shoulder, and George looks away when he remembers the taste of his skin.

Dream shuffles out from under George’s weight, throwing both legs over the side of the bed. He

regards George with a tender glance before retrieving his fallen boxers and a washcloth.

There's still the lingering sting of shame— being in another man's bed, coated in his marks and completely bare on his sheets. So George covers his lap with a pillow and huffs at himself.

It's a dumb feeling to have— he knows this.

But Dream doesn't comment on it. He just coos at George's blush and lets him clean himself up, leaping back onto the lofted bed with eased grace. Green eyes look away as he shimmies back into his briefs, like he can read George's mind— his heart and his conflicted feelings.

He smiles to himself at the blond's considerate nature.

When they lie down next to each other, nose to nose, George doesn't know what to do with his hands, his legs, his *anything*. The bed is twin-sized, barely large enough to fit both their bodies.

So he hesitates. He hangs back and cradles his arms close to his body— bites his lip and looks down at the pillow.

“George,” Dream murmurs suddenly, fingertips brushing along George's shoulder, “do you trust me?”

Do you trust me?

The question is layered; George understands this.

There's a little itch at the back of his mind that tries to raise the alarms. It tries to resurface the words his date had spilled over a splintered table and forgotten food— the red flags and the lies and the broken promises she'd regaled.

And maybe George can admit he's a bit of a fool.

Because he shuts the door on those memories; he hides them away with a lock and key. Out of

sight.

And then he's nodding, slow and probably less calculated than the decision should be.

Dream hums. The fingers along his shoulder dip down to his waist. "Then turn around and face the wall for me."

It's like his body is moving before he even processes it. He shifts until he's staring blankly at the wall, muddled with confusion and nerves strung tight with anticipation.

One of Dream's large palms settles hotly on the softness of his stomach. Then, he *pulls*.

George lets out an embarrassing squeak when they're tugged flush together, chest to back. Dream's forearm locks around his ribs, possessive in a way he's never experienced. There are puffs of air settling on his neck, rustling shorter hairs and dampening his skin.

It's new and so unequivocally *Dream*.

And— *wow* . George *really* likes it.

"This okay?" Dream asks, because of course he does.

And George will never admit how much he loves feeling like this— small and pliable and *protected*. But he manages a tiny, affirmative hum so Dream doesn't pull his flame away.

Sleep begins to sprawl through his brain, spiderwebs of sluggishness tugging at dark curtains to cover his vision.

Right before he's about to slip under, Dream says something. It's so *small*— so meek and uncharacteristic George almost convinces himself it isn't Dream's voice.

"You won't push me away again tomorrow...right?"

His inflection is shaky. The fingers spread above George's heart contract, fist trembling ever-so-slightly. The line of his body curls around George's back. His forehead digs into the skin of his spine.

George frowns.

He sounds *pained*. Like he's trying to conceal aching wounds and scars that split beneath his skin.

So George brings his palm to Dream's hand. He thumbs along his knuckles, just enough for the joints to relax. Lithe fingers slip between the gaps in Dream's own, and they *squeeze*, right against the thumping of George's heart.

"I won't," he promises.

I don't think I can, anymore.

And it's true. He doesn't think he can return to the world he's stepped out of. Because the new one stretched in front of him is *daunting*, but it's also *exciting*.

It's *welcoming*.

They fall asleep together, beneath moonlight and the fog of swirling smoke.

It's the best sleep George has gotten in weeks.

Dryness coats his tongue, when he wakes.

Gummed lips stretch around a yawn, ruddy cheek nuzzling against the pillow he holds a death grip on.

He shivers, when he registers the feeling of something warm ghosting along his throat.

It's gentle; it's *ticklish*.

George brings his hand up to swat it away lazily, emitting a low groan at being woken up. There's a low laugh from somewhere in front of him.

Blindly, he reaches out and shoves against whoever or *whatever* woke him up. They just laugh *more*. And the damn thing on his neck won't *fucking* move.

"*F'ck off*," he mumbles, pawing at the presence— *hand? fingers?*— on his throat. He whines when it doesn't budge.

It takes a few moments, but George eventually relents to the knowledge that he should probably open his eyes. He blinks, once, twice, three times. The blurry world around him settles into clarity — the walls unfuzz and gentle sun brightens the comforter wrapped about his torso.

As the room clears up, so does the view of Dream's face.

They're facing each other, and there's a dopey, boyish smile on the rose petals he remembers feeling on his stomach, his thighs, his chest. Oakwood hair falls in tousled waves along his forehead and nape, glowing golden under the morning light.

One of his hands rests on the side of George's throat— thumb tracing little circles where it lies.

George's pupils dilate. His lips part, breathing going staccato in his chest.

"Wh't're you doing..." he breathes, eyes half lidded and trained on the movement of the wrist that occupies his neck.

“Nothing,” Dream whispers back.

It’s a blatant lie, and George finds it funny for some reason. So he giggles tiredly, mouth involuntarily curled into a smile. “Y’s you *are*, you’re doing someth’ weird t’ my neck, you— you *weirdo*.”

There’s a bit of comfortable silence when George yawns again, palm coming up to smother it with a press.

“You really do need to laugh more, Georgie. It’s cute.”

George’s yawn finishes, and he immediately scoffs, ignoring the way he flushes down his neck at the compliment. “Whatever.”

The hand on his neck changes course, sliding down to his chest. Soft fingertips linger on patches of skin, as if tracing nonexistent constellations on a sparsely-freckled night sky.

Dream smiles, eyeing where he touches. “I like when you let me mark you.”

George shoots him a confused look.

“Why?”

Lying sideways, Dream manages little more than a half-shrug. “I’ve always liked when my partners let me express how I feel about them through sex and stuff. I guess hickeys are like a thing that stays even after everything’s over. It’s like a—uh—a reminder.”

George’s brows knit together. “A reminder?” He doesn’t understand.

Dream goes pink in his cheeks, and he coughs a few times. “A reminder that you—um—that we—” he stumbles through his words, green eyes looking at the wall over George’s shoulder. Both of his hands come together, trying to fiddle with rings that aren’t there.

Click, click, click sounds behind his teeth.

Curiosity urges George to shuffle a bit closer. “A reminder that I...?”

Dream’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he swallows, and George’s heart picks up in his chest. He licks his lips, wetting them like dew on petals.

They part, and Dream shakily starts to speak.

“George, I— ” he sputters.

And, because the world continues to subtly torture him, George goes *blank*.

Because there are sudden knocks at the front door.

Both men practically jump out of their skin, flinching as a few more follow, harsher than the last. They both blink in unison. The entire dorm falls silent.

George curses at himself when a spike of panic races through his veins. Alarm bells sound. Adrenaline shoots every muscle rimrod straight, and he hates it *so much*.

His fight or flight sits him upright—*fast*. Every nerve ending screams for him to *escape, run*.

Because he’s in *Dream’s* bed with *Dream’s* marks and he had sex with a guy last night and *people are going to know if someone comes in right now and everyone will know he likes it everyone will know he had sex with a man and—*

“George,” Dream murmurs with such recognized haste that it shocks them both. “Calm down, sweetheart— *it’s okay*. I locked both the suite’s door last night and our own, okay? They can’t get in.”

It does little to calm George’s trembling body and anxiety-ridden system, but at least his breathing evens out.

“I’ll go answer it, yeah? Just stay here.”

Dream throws the edge of the comforter off his thighs and lap, lowering himself to the carpet to pull on a shirt from his drawer. Just as he unlocks their room’s door to answer the suite’s, George feels a question bubble up his throat.

He *has* to say it, even if it might be insulting. Because if he doesn’t, George thinks he might drive himself *crazy*.

“You won’t— you won’t *say* anything, right? About— about *this*?”

Dream stops in his tracks. He sends a reassuring look over his shoulder.

But his brows are strung tight. His smile looks taut— so unlike his normal, easygoing one.

And yet, he still just nods.

“Of course I won’t,” he promises.

Promises.

“I’ll be back.”

And then, he’s gone— door shut behind him.

George hears a few more muffled knocks from the front door, and he holds his breath. There’s a *click* of the handle being opened, and soon Dream’s indecipherable voice filters through the thin drywall, accompanied by another, high-pitched one.

His head falls into his palms, shoulders *finally* falling lax.

He *knows* he needs to get control of that. Of the primal, *constant* itch that tells him what he's doing is *wrong* and that everyone will *hate* him if they find out.

It's irrational— *stupid*.

And yet it still has its chokehold on every limb, every thought, every action. It's *horrible*.

As George tortures himself with thought after thought after *thought* of each fear that torments him, his ears catch something loud.

Yelling. Arguing.

Dream's morning voice is terse and slightly sharp, raised louder than George has ever heard it before. His head perks up, straining to make out what's being said.

Another voice, higher and anger-ridden, flares up and shouts right back.

George is moving out of bed before he even realizes what he's doing.

He pulls on the first hoodie he sees from the end of Dream's bed. His heart is *pounding* as he nears their door— bare soles padding nervously to where harsh voices continue to batter one another.

A shaky breath leaves his nose when he catches the tail end of Dream's sentence.

“—ing happened! I cannot believe you'd even think I'd— ”

The other voice jumps back in. “*Yeah, okay— glad to see you're still the same. God, you're such an asshole, Dream—* ”

His blood runs ice cold.

George recognizes that inflection— *easily*.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuck—

The hand around the door knob goes slick with sweat. He *grips*.

Some part of him just wants to cower under the bed. To hide away from his problems and *ignore* them, as if they'll magically go away on their own.

But life doesn't work like that.

So, heart in his throat and green licking at his ankles, climbing up, *up*, George steps through the doorway.

At first, all he sees is Dream's back blocking the suite's doorway— muscles drawn tight through his shirt, tense and nervous. He approaches warily, with light footsteps and bated breath.

Dream speaks again, quieter than before. It's strained— *pleading*.

"You need to *leave*, okay? He's going through a lot of shit, and I fucking get that you're angry or whatever, but you don't understand what— "

A floorboard creaks under George's weight.

The tar pit in his stomach deepens, then *plummets*, when Dream whips his head around, eyes wide and alarmed.

"*George*," he starts, unblinking.

But before he gets a chance to say another word, *she* speaks. *Her*, with baby blue eyes and sweeping blond hair and holiness in the very footprints she leaves.

It's the most hellish thing George has ever been greeted to in his life, when her frustrated—*disappointed*— voice floods his senses and unravels any foundation he may have formed.

And it's in that moment that George is faced head-on with his needs and wants.

Two opposing forces.

The consequence of deleting that ten digit number.

Because maybe heaven is hell, when she mutters, spiteful,

“Hi, George.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me too much for this one <3
Feedback always appreciated

End Notes

Feedback always appreciated ;)

And just general thoughts about the story hehe

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